

William Jerome Harrison 1845-1909

brief notes on one of the earliest photographic historians

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It is a common assumption that the history of photography is a recent field of scholarly inquiry. Most photographers are only aware of the names of Beaumont Newhall and, perhaps, Helmut Gernsheim, both of whom produced important and influential texts in the mid-20th century. Newhall, in particular, was largely responsible for introducing the study of the history of photography as an academic discipline in US colleges and universities. At the University of New Mexico in the early 1970s he trained a number of MFA and PhD students who on graduation took up teaching positions in various institutions in America and abroad and, in turn, taught and trained even more scholars. Of course, historians also came out of similar programs at various institutions but it is still a valid generalisation that Newhall was the preeminent historian of his generation and that most subsequent scholars have been heavily influenced by his researches. It is therefore forgivable if today's scholars presume that the field began with Newhall's work. "Forgivable" but not accurate.

The medium has had its own historians from the earliest years of photography. For the first few decades these "historians" were primarily fellow photographers, journalists for lay periodicals, contributors to the photographic press, deliverers of papers at learned societies, and experts in various other fields who saw the possibilities of this new recording process as a potent tool for their own studies. These individuals took note of, and published, information about the pioneers and early processes of photography. It is their documentation of the medium which provides contemporary historians with the bedrock of data on which is built their own knowledge of 19th century photography. Without these early articles we would not have a photographic history today.

One of the most important photographic historians of the 19th century was William Jerome Harrison. Although extremely well known, and appreciated, in his own lifetime, he has been largely forgotten; it is doubtful if more than a dozen contemporary photographers or historians have heard his name, and fewer still appreciate his contributions to our knowledge of early photography. Harrison

was not, primarily, a photographer or photographic historian. He was a geologist.

William Jerome Harrison was born at Hemsworth, Yorkshire, England, on the 16 March 1845. While still a child, he was taken by his parents to Australia in the hope of improving his father's health. To no avail. His father died shortly after the family's arrival. On his return to England, Harrison was educated at the Westminster Training College, for seven years, and at Cheltenham College, for a further two years. He was a brilliant pupil, graduating as senior prizeman and holder of the highest obtainable government certificate. With these credentials he was appointed headmaster of a large boys' school in Leicester.

In 1868, at the age of 23, he began his scientific education. For the next four years he spent a good deal of time in the laboratories of the government science schools at South Kensington, studying under some of the most brilliant scientific minds of the time, including Professors Frankland, Huxley, Guthrie, Judd, and so on. He was awarded the highest honors in chemistry, physics, geology and physical geography, being double gold medalist in the last two subjects in 1872.

In that year William Jerome Harrison was appointed chief curator of the Leicester Corporation Museum where he established large and successful science classes. But by this time Harrison's main preoccupation was geology. He was elected a Fellow of the Geological Society in 1876, and received grants from the Royal Society for his geological researches. At this period his two major publications were Manual of Practical Geology (1876) and Geology of the Counties of England and of North and South Wales (1882), which became a standard text in the field. For his work in geology, Harrison was awarded the Darwin Medal in 1884 and the Barlow-Jameson fund in 1890.

By this time Harrison had moved from Leicester to Birmingham; in 1880 he was appointed Science Demonstrator to the School Board of Birmingham. Here he was given a large staff of assistants, well-appointed laboratories and a technical school, in which he directed the science studies of about 6,000 youths and hundreds of young teachers. Meanwhile, Harrison was becoming a widely read journalist, contributing articles on a broad range of subjects to respected contemporaneous journals and publications, such as Cornhill, Knowledge, The National Dictionary of Biography, Science Gossip, etc.

This introduction(1) will indicate that William Jerome Harrison was well established in his field before encountering photography, in any personal way. He began practical work with a camera in 1881, which means that he began his

photography with dry-plates. Although the old collodion (or wet-plate) process would continue to be used for a decade or more, particularly by photographers of the "old school," most newcomers to the medium by the early 1880s began with the new, and vastly more convenient, gelatine emulsions. Harrison wrote:

Within the last few years photography has made a new departure. The introduction of gelatine dry plates and films has made the process so clear and, by comparison, so easy, that photographers have multiplied a hundred fold. Oh! that we could bring back Daguerre with his costly silver plates, which required such tremendous polishing; Fox Talbot with his calotypes, and Scott Archer with his wet collodion plates, silver bath, and travelling tent, which made the landscape photographer's life a burden to him, and show them our light and complete equipment, with which a man may travel round the world, and leave, if he pleases, his pictures to be developed by his grandchildren, with every assurance that, if preserved with reasonable care, they will turn out all right, even after the lapse of years. (2)

It is reasonably safe to assume that Harrison became interested in photography as a tool for recording geological specimens - his own photographs in these early years depict nothing else. His photographs of geological phenomena were exhibited in Birmingham on the occasion of a visit by the British Association in 1886. For these records, Harrison used a Scovill whole-plate camera, fitted with the Eastman roll-holder and an unidentified 4x5 inch camera for enlargements and lantern slides. Undoubtedly his photographs were used in lectures and demonstrations at his geology classes.

W. Jerome Harrison needed an outlet and place of support for his growing enthusiasm for photography; he was a founder of the Birmingham Photographic Society and was elected its Vice-President. This appointment was not without its small crisis. A disgruntled member wrote an attack on the Society which was published in The Amateur Photographer, late in 1884. Harrison, his honour besmirched, resigned his office. Almost immediately the members of the Society, at its annual meeting, unanimously appealed to Harrison to withdraw his resignation. The editorial writer of The Amateur Photographer was gratified: "No better chemist or photographer - or gentleman more capable of advancing the status of the society - could be found than Mr. Harrison" (3) In addition, the editor refused to publish any more letters from the Society in his columns. This trivial incident merely underlines the fact that in a few years William Jerome Harrison had become an important personality in the field of photography. He was already writing articles on the medium for both the photographic press and

lay journals, (4) and speaking as an authority at Society meetings.

Many of Harrison's ideas were novel and enlightening. A good example was included in a paper read before the Birmingham Photographic Society in June 1885. He said:

Much useful local work may be done by a photographic society. By securing accurate representations of old buildings, we can furnish a record for posterity whose accuracy cannot be disputed, and whose interest in the future will be great. But I would not only photograph the old buildings - I would secure on rapid plates impressions of the daily appearance of our streets, of the principal lines of thoroughfare, and of the busy crowds by which they are traversed. Even in the half century which has elapsed since the discovery of photography, if such pictures could have been secured of Birmingham at intervals of every five or ten years, what an interest they would have for us today! We exclaim at the pleasure it would give us if we could see photographs of Stratford-on-Avon as it was when Shakespeare lived there; but there will come a time when a similar desire will be expressed to see England as it was in 1885; and, fortunately, by the aid of photography, it will be possible for such a desire to be gratified.

On many subsequent occasions, Harrison urged photographers to compile photographic surveys of local areas; he was particularly enthusiastic about recording the historical monuments in Warwickshire. Nothing much occurred to put the scheme into practice until he led a deputation from the Society to a Sutton Coldfield scientific society known as the Vesey Club in 1889. Once again he advocated a photographic survey of the county. It was fortunate that the Vice-President of the Vesey Club was John Benjamin Stone (later Sir Benjamin). Stone gave the idea his unqualified support, and together they invited representatives of all the photographic, literary, artistic and scientific societies in the county to a meeting where the planned "Photographic Survey of Warwickshire" would be announced, and plans made for its efficient instigation. (5) The scheme was a resounding success, and Sir Benjamin Stone became one of the survey's most prolific photographers. Similar surveys sprang up all over Britain, leading to the National Photographic Record Association.

Harrison must have been gratified at the success of his idea, but he was not willing to see the matter end with local survey collections or even national associations. He travelled to the Photographic Congress in Chicago in 1893 and delivered a paper appealing for all nations to create international collections of photographs - with the aim of exchanging these photographs between countries.

The paper was heard "with great enthusiasm" (6) by the members of the Congress who set up an international commission for the study of the idea. But nothing was done about this ambitious project. It is true that several countries formed their own photographic archives on the basis of Harrison's proposal: In 1894 France instigated the "Association du Musee des Photographies Documentaires", with Leon Vidal as President; in 1901 Belgium began a similar association, with Ernest de Potter as president; in the same year Switzerland founded the "Musee Suisse des Photographies Documentaires", with Dr. Demole as president, and so on. Nations were beginning to be aware of the value of photographic documents to future generations, but there was, as yet, no provision for the international exchange of these collections.

Almost immediately after the Photographic Survey of Warwickshire was begun, Harrison had another ambitious idea, one which received national press coverage: he suggested that state photographers should be appointed to amass pictorial records of people and events as historical documents. The Daily Graphic thought the idea a splendid one:

Is photography to play an important part in the making of history? The early story of the world is written in crude pictures, and now that photographs can be made as permanent as the paper they are printed on, there are many reasons why we should revert, with some obvious improvements, to the ancient methods of the Egyptian historians. In 1888, at a conference of photographers, Mr. W. Jerome Harrison, F.G.S., proposed that State photographers should be appointed whose duty it should be to keep a pictorial record of men and things; and in a little pamphlet recently published has repeated the suggestion which, by the way, met with the unqualified authority of so great a photographic authority as Captain Abney. There is something very fascinating in Mr. Harrison's idea. Men and cities pass away, and the face of the country is ever changing. Columns of written description only give us a faint idea of the appearance of things in days gone by. We can increase our knowledge of the past but little, but the time will come when the present era will be history, and authentic photographic records would then be invaluable.

From these facts it will be evident that William Jerome Harrison was an original thinker, an indefatigable worker and an enthusiast for record keeping. He needed all these traits of character for the historical projects for which he is, or should be, best known.

By 1887 William Jerome Harrison had compiled the first complete bibliography of photography, which remains today one of the most useful and accurate research

tools for the 19th century photographic historian. The amount of work expended by Harrison in the compilation of this data cannot be overemphasised; this is the sort of grassroots type of research which is so sorely needed, but lacking, from today's historians. During 1886 and 1887 the results of Harrison's research were published in The Photographic News. On completion he had listed, and often annotated, 328 titles of books on photography. Harrison compiled his list from the English Catalogue, the catalogues of libraries formed by the leading scientific societies, such as the Royal, the Chemical, the Geological, etc. (finding "their barrenness in books on photography to be indeed remarkable"); he ransacked the Educational Library at South Kensington and the Library of the Patent Office; he made a thorough search of every issue of The Photographic News (one of the most important organs of record in early photography) from its first issue in 1858, looking for reviews as well as notes and allusions by other writers which would provide clues to the more obscure and forgotten publications. (7)

The complete bibliography is an important research tool even today and deserves to be reprinted. For this work alone William Jerome Harrison would be an important figure in 19th century British photography.

The second most important research project in the early history of photography, by Harrison, was his: A History of Photography, written as a practical guide and an introduction to its latest developments...with a biographical sketch of the author, and an appendix by Dr. Maddox on the discovery of the gelatino-bromide process. This book was introduced by various publishers in Britain during 1888 and in New York by the Scovill Manufacturing Company in 1887. For Britain, two editions were available: a deluxe edition of 250 copies at 7 shillings and sixpence and a cheap edition at 3 shillings and sixpence. Even the editor of The Photographic News was astonished at Harrison's "laboriously compiled historical matter...unknown to most of those who are generally well-informed as to photographic matters...." (8)

Again, this book remains pertinent and useful to photographic historians today. Harrison continued his historical detective work in many directions, communicating his results to the photographic press at frequent intervals. These articles include: "History of the Discovery of the Gelatino-Bromide Process", 1887 (9); "Historical Note on the Use of Gelatine in Photography", 1888 (10); "Was Photography Discovered a Century Ago", 1889 (11); "Instantaneous Photography", 1890 (12); and so on. Harrison's work in bibliography continued. He was aware that prior to the introduction of photographic journals much useful information on the medium occurred in lay periodicals, such as

Literary Gazette and, particularly, Notes and Queries. From the latter publication Harrison produced a complete bibliography of photographic subjects appearing in the first twelve volumes. (13)

William Jerome Harrison also published instructional articles and a textbook for beginners: Photography for All; an elementary textbook and introduction to the art of taking photographs, 1888. His experience in teaching is evident in the clarity of the instruction in this manual; his abilities in writing and editing are also evident in the fact that he was invited to be the European Editor of the International Annual.

In common with many prominent writers on photography in the 19 century, William Jerome Harrison occasionally contributed articles under a pseudonym: "Talbot Archer." This was true in the case of a fascinating two-part analysis of "Photography in Recent Novels," published in The British Journal of Photography in December/January, 1888/1889. (14) Harrison read all the recently published novels and provided a brief synopsis of the plot and amusing quotations, in order that photographers may "see themselves as others see them." The true identity of Talbot Archer did not have to wait until the death of Harrison before it was revealed. As one critic remarked in 1892 "'Talbot Archer' and Mr. W. Jerome Harrison are tolerably well known to be one and the same person." (15)

It seems possible that Harrison used his pseudonym for the more opinionated, as opposed to factual, articles which he prepared; he could create a different "persona" whose outspoken and often radical attitudes would not disturb his scholarly reputation. This possibility is borne out by an amusing incident which occurred in 1892. The reasonable Mr. Harrison urged the Photographic Society of Great Britain to take upon itself the direction and organisation of his grand scheme--a National Photographic Record and Survey. "Such a task will be commenced, and must be completed." (16) But the radical Talbot Archer feared that the Society "is in too fossilised a state to furnish the men, the energy, and the funds which are needed to inaugurate this great movement." Unfortunately, no one was fooled; his audience knew that Harrison and Archer were the same person.

All these activities - from promoting his national photographic survey idea, his scholarly papers on the history of photography, his textbooks for beginners in the medium, his painstaking compilation of bibliographies, his editing of publications, his Vice-Presidency of the Birmingham Photographic Society, and so on - would be enough to tax the energies of any man. But William Jerome Harrison was still

the Science Demonstrator of the Birmingham School Board. In this capacity he authored several textbooks in various fields of science, including elementary manuals in magnetism, voltaic electricity, mechanics, metallurgy, domestic economy, agriculture, etc. He also wrote about education, such as his publication: On a New Method of Teaching Science in Public Elementary Schools, 1884. He was also continuing his researches and publications in geology, a field in which he was an acknowledged expert. As mentioned previously, in 1890 the Council of the Geological Society awarded him the proceeds of the Barlow-Jameson fund in recognition of his "valuable contributions to geological science." His publications in geology, apart from those already mentioned, include: Earth-Knowledge. A Textbook of Physiography, 1887, which went through several editions well into the 20 century; Elementary Textbook of Geology, 1889, which also saw several editions; A Sketch of the Geology of Leicestershire and Rutland, 1877, etc.

Harrison's interest in bibliography extended to his field of geology and led to several publications, including: A Bibliography of Norfolk Glaciology..., 1897, and A Bibliography of the great stone monuments of Wiltshire - Stonehenge and Avebury, 1901.

In all three fields of interest - education, geology and photography - William Jerome Harrison excelled. He died in 1909. But in this context it is his contributions to our knowledge about the history of early photography which deserves special attention. His researches, especially his bibliographies, were unique and invaluable contributions at a time when this information was in danger of being lost for ever. The fact that his name and work have been forgotten and neglected by current historians is as incomprehensible as it is shameful.

Footnotes and References:

1. These facts about the early life and career are taken from The Photographic News, 8 July 1892, p. 439. This article was reprinted from Science and Art, which in turn is substantially the same as the biography of Harrison written by W. I. Lincoln Adams for A History of Photography..., 1887.
2. "The work of a Local Photographic Society," W. Jerome Harrison, a paper read before the Birmingham Photographic Society, June 1885. See: "Photographic Survey of Warwickshire," a paper read before the same Society in December 1889. See: The Photographic News, 3 July 1885 and 20 December 1889.

3. The Amateur Photographer, December 1885, p. 577.
4. For example: "The Rise and Progress of Photography," Cornhill Magazine, May 1885.
5. The Photographic News, 20 December 1889, pp. 859-861.
6. The British Journal of Photography, 15 January 1904, pp. 50-51.
7. For a summation of this research, see: The Photographic News, 8 April 1887, pp. 214-215.
8. The Photographic News, 4 May 1888, p. 284.
9. The British Journal of Photography, 21 October 1887.
10. The British Journal of Photography, 18 January 1888, pp. 21-22.
11. The Photographic Quarterly, Vol. 1, No. 1, October 1889. p. 35.
12. A long running weekly series in The Amateur Photographer, which began on 3 October 1890, p. 239.
13. The Photographic News, 9 October 1891, p. 704.
14. The British Journal of Photography, 28 December 1888, pp. 825-826; 25 January 1889, pp. 55-56.
15. The British Journal of Photography, 24 June 1892, p. 408.
16. Ibid.
17. A more complete listing of William Jerome Harrison's publications can be found in The National Union Catalog Pre-1956 Imprints.

Note: W. J. Harrison should not be confused with his contemporaries: W. H. Harrison (who invented a universal adaptor for fitting lenses to cameras and a magnesium flashlight) or J. A. Harrison (who was joint inventor of the Pantascopic Camera). All three Harrisons were well known at the same time.

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