

The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885-1918

Elizabeth Edwards. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2012. 344pp. ISBN: 978-0822351047

When a second-hand copy of *The Camera as Historian* (published in 1916) was given to the author by a colleague, its intriguing contents inspired her to undertake a study of photographic surveys of England from the mid 1880s to the end of World War One. Along with a range of other contemporary works and fruitful primary research in several large photographic surveys still extant, in the resulting study Edwards pursues the themes contained within that 1916 volume to reveal popular responses to rapid change in the English social and cultural landscape. This was an era in which the amateur photographer came to epitomise a generation's growing fascination with and desire to record its own past for the benefit of future generations. In pursuing the survey, Edwards' excellent book offers new insight into the power of the photograph and its uses in shaping an English historical imagination during decades of enormous change. She skilfully interweaves a selection of photographs from surveys, such as of ruined farmhouses, return soldiers, or scenes of village life (all beautifully reproduced in this attractive volume) with a discussion of modern memory embedded in the local survey as in other imperial national preservationist projects of this period in British imperial history. This book investigates the processes by which such antiquarianism came to combine a positivist confidence in the future – arguably represented by re-inscription of modern empire itself - with anxiety about the modernisation of life taking place at home.

Over the past decade and more, Edwards has been at the forefront of scholarship on the power of photography in the modern imagination, particularly through her work on the ethnographic gaze – of significance also to this volume. Here Edwards combines fine-grained archival research with the latest scholarship, analysis and interpretation concerned with the historical interconnections between photography, memory, and the emergence of Englishness. In the process, she reveals how images of traditional structures or once-popular rituals were designed to inspire a mixture of affect and nostalgia among the populace yet engender within them the virtues of scientific objectivity. Important to Edwards' thesis is the potency of pictorialism in producing this self-consciously educative outcome; what mattered, she argues, was how a chosen scene was staged as worthy of remembering. Like the English survey at home, the imperial archive of the colonies lent the appearance of permanence and continuity to individual, otherwise disconnected, pieces of information. Each image within a sequence turned into a representation of some larger significance. Thus the meaning attributed to any one photograph emerged in the process of becoming part of a survey. Moreover, survey photographs gained an air of scientific accuracy through their titles, a self-referencing cycle of meaning making that Edwards identifies between viewer, amateur photographer, and historian. The effects of this circuitry can be seen in the impact of picturesque scenes of bricks and mortar on what Edwards calls the 'self-conscious act of memorialisation' (2). Here amateur photography intersected with the larger project of remembering, co-joining the local and the national (with its imperial interests) in the task of rendering certain landscapes and kinds of activities as of inherent value to the modern citizen. In this way, Edwards shows how historical imagination is constructed through the complex and symbiotic relationship between memory and forgetting, not least through the photographic survey of late Victorian England.

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