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book review of

*The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographs and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918* by Elizabeth Edwards

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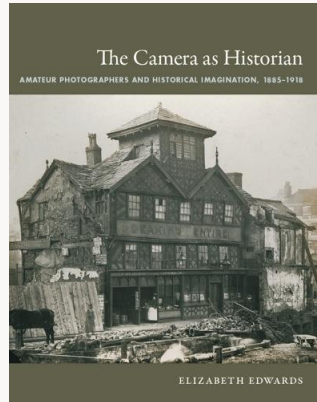
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Elizabeth Edwards,  
*The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographs and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918.*  
Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.  
344 pp.; 121 b&w illus.; notes; bibliography; index.  
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In 1916, a group of amateur photographers engaged by the Photographic Record and Survey of Surrey published a small volume dedicated to an elaboration of the practices governing the use of photography in recording the past: *The Camera as Historian*. The book opens with an annotated comparison between a drawing of a lock from Beddington Manor House, Surrey, and a photograph of the same architectural detail, in order to assert the incomparable superiority of the photographic record, a claim that from our contemporary vantage point reveals much about the perceived relationship between photography and the past and the utility of photography as evidence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The authors of this 1916 edition self-consciously placed their work within a long tradition of historical observation and documentation, outlining the importance of fieldwork and certain organizational structures; they also asserted the particular value of their medium and its attendant technologies in the ambitious endeavor of presenting England and its history, which indeed characterized much of the survey movement. This account of the work of a single amateur photographic survey society constitutes the introduction to, and has inspired the title of, Elizabeth Edwards's most recent book, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographs and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918*. By approaching survey photography as a material and social practice (that is, as a series of relations between cultural identity, nationality, economy, photographic technologies, and art), Edwards, a visual and historical anthropologist, has produced the first comprehensive study of the English survey movement as well as a historiography of two intersecting and previously under-theorized histories: that of survey photography and of amateur photography.

The amateur photographic survey movement, which Edwards identifies as an example of what James Helva has termed a “photography complex,” emerged within the context of the vigorous desire to record a range of objects and phenomena of social and physical landscapes undergoing dynamic change, and the expansion of photography as a pastime in the nineteenth century (24).<sup>[1]</sup> The author describes this as a particularly productive “interaction of epistemological frames and technological possibility” (3). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hundreds of amateur photographers contributed to the project of surveying the monuments of England’s past, including parish churches, village landmarks, medieval cottages, and folk customs, and preserving them for future generations. The movement never had an official government mandate, although it did follow charges issued in essays and public papers diffused through many regional and local societies and committees; Edwards cites a statement by W. Jerome Harrison in 1899 as the first true consolidation of these ideas with his insistence on the production of a “True Pictorial History of the Present Day” (2). The scope of the work produced by these amateur photographers was impressive; Edwards traced 73 surveys through archives comprised of nearly 55,000 photographs by 1,000 photographers. Despite the breadth of images, and material produced the record and survey movement has received little serious treatment in the histories of photography written in the twentieth century, as the images were largely created by unknown amateurs and have since resided in the recessed storage of libraries and collections.

While recent scholarship certainly boasts a more diverse array of critical perspectives and archival practices, this genre of photography is often reduced to a consequence of heightened nationalism and sentimentality associated with the anxiety around the conditions of modernity. Edwards endeavors to complicate this narrative, and her historical anthropology offers a rejoinder to the characterization of English survey photography as a nostalgic impulse—conservative, reactionary, and bourgeois—that has informed much of the existing literature.<sup>[2]</sup> While Edwards concedes that certain nationalistic, imperial, and even propagandistic agendas were a part of the movement, she argues that to read its activities as merely a manifestation of turn-of-the-century nostalgia is to categorize the images in a manner that denies their discursive complexity (22).

For Edwards, the photographs of the record and survey movement are imbricated with myriad social and political relations, as well as historical and mythical conceptions of time, and yet, for the purposes of her study, she is more invested in the images as a recognizable type, entangled in a dialogue of historical objectivity and subjectivity (17). Edwards’s principle interest is in the relationship of photography and historical imagination, following John Tagg’s assertion that the photograph can fulfill an evidentiary role not by virtue of natural fact, but through social and semiotic processes.<sup>[3]</sup> This includes the technical choices made by photographers in capturing and printing their images, the aesthetic variety of the photographs, styles of labeling and captioning, the institutions governing the organization of archives and the display of series, and the use of language, particularly the concept of history, to describe the pictures in correspondence, journalism, and didactic material. Implicit throughout her explication of aspects of the culture of English amateur photography at a specific historical moment is the broader question “to what extent is it possible to posit a history that is played out at the level of the image?” (3). Indeed, Edwards here is engaged thoroughly with relevant scholarship from the fields of philosophy, sociology, critical theory, and photography studies by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, John Tagg, Allan Sekula, and others. And yet, in her thorough

attention to the images and texts of the archive, Edwards consistently highlights the primary source material, for her task is not to recapitulate the cultural context that produced the British record and survey movement, but to analyze, at a microscopic level, the formation of a particular photographic practice through conditions precipitated by various agencies and agents.

By focusing on seventeen survey projects, Edwards is able to demonstrate the great variety of manners in which these photographs were conceived, executed, and managed by a host of photographers, record and survey societies, archives, libraries, and museums. In the first chapter, Edwards outlines some of the broader cultural conditions of the late nineteenth century that facilitated the record and survey movement in England: the notion of photography as an empirical means of producing documentation and externalized collective memory; the primacy of visual consciousness in a society of spectacle and mass production; the technological developments that allowed photography to become a mass art and popular pastime; and certain social and economic shifts that fostered a national concern with the historical past. However, as a prelude to the later chapters, the author stresses the need to move beyond the master narrative of cultural trends to understand a fragmented movement comprised of patently local initiatives; the themes of the social utility of photography, memory, modernity, the individual and the collective, and perhaps most importantly, rupture recur throughout the remainder of the book.

The depth of Edwards's research is perhaps best showcased in the final chapters, where she addresses the public utility of the photographs as part of her effort to reconstruct survey photography as a cultural practice. The English survey movement was indeed unique in the sense that the recording and inscription of history was carried out almost entirely by amateurs motivated by a kind of moral imperative; the archives they produced as a result of their efforts functioned, according to Edwards, as a very "public history" (207). In tracing survey photographs through their reproduction, display, and preservation in archives, Edwards argues that the images produced histories through their inclusion in exhibitions, press, and lectures, which constituted a visual economy of the period. Through meticulous research, she determined the format of displays in local libraries and historical societies, and the types of individuals who attended these shows or made requests to review the material. The final chapter, an epilogue which considers the legacy of record and survey material, also includes the author's frank discussion of the challenges of working with these archives, most notably the dispersion of surveys across collections or their absorption into other archives, effectively stripping the series of their particular histories, reducing them to "mere content with little sense of the processes of their cultural, technical, or intellectual production" (252). This consideration of the "cultural biographies" of survey photographs further underscores the importance of Edwards's reconstitution of this history.

Despite the diligent explanation of the execution, circulation, and display of images, one cannot help but wish that the author would have attended more to the images themselves. Edwards stipulates that her illustrations were selected as typical examples of certain categories of survey photographs, and this does seem consistent with her thesis. Yet, discussions of stylistic inconsistency and of pictorial versus scientific approaches to photographing could benefit from closer readings of individual images.

Edwards demonstrates a true mastery over her material and an adept use of critical theory, such that the book remains wholly engaging. *The Camera as Historian* positions Edwards as an exemplar in the writing of history and ethnography within the fields of photography and visual culture. With over one hundred illustrations and a comprehensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources, this book will surely remain a useful reference on British survey photography and a model historiography of both British history and photography.

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## Notes

[1] According to James Helva, a “photography complex” is constituted by the cultural and social practices through which certain images are made, and depends upon a range of agencies, both visible and invisible. James Helva, “The Photography Complex: Exposing Boxer-Era China, 1900–1,” in *Photographies East: The Camera and Its Histories in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. R. Morris (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 81.

[2] See John Taylor, *A Dream of England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994); Jens Jäger, “Picturing Nations: Landscape Photography and National Identity in Britain and Germany in the Mid-Nineteenth century” in Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, eds., *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003); and V.L. Pollock, “Dislocated Narratives and Sites of Memory: Amateur Photographic Surveys in Britain, 1889–1897” in *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2009): 1–26.

[3] John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 4.