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Fisher Lassie and Child

D.O. Hill & R. Adamson, 1843-1848, calotype, 187x143mm
National Portrait Gallery, London
P6(201)

At first glance, an invitation to write about an entirely unknown photograph seemed unusual, to say the least. Just where and how would I begin? Nor was this my only concern. The image in question turned out to be by David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, no less; early nineteenth-century pioneers of photography in Scotland who come with impeccable credentials. In the beginning, there was Niépce, Daguerre, Fox Talbot, and then the Scottish pair. Go much further back in the medium's history and you begin to fall off the edge. Furthermore, their work has been widely praised, indeed assessed as exemplary, by many of photography's most illustrious practitioners. Clearly, I was on territory that had already been staked out with numerous advance claims.

Undeterred, I tried to look at the problem another way, and it occurred to me that the act of *pretending I don't know what I'm looking at* is a technique that I've been using for a very long time. It's a way of asking some basic questions about photographs; questions that are basic enough that they might stand some chance of being answered. For example, I might ask, what does this image look like, and why does it look the way it does? This question relates to how the image was produced, and to how the taking and making of photographs is a more or less complex, choice-making process. Often the line of enquiry can be very basic indeed. In fact, if a useful guide is needed, I'd keep it as simple as the one that was handed me years ago: *talk about the trivial as if it's important, because it usually is*. This seems to me a much better place to start than any speculation about what an artist or photographer *intended* the image to communicate. It's not that I entirely disregard that sort of information; only that I'm sceptical. Speaking as a materialist, I like, wherever possible, to deal with what's there.

From the beginning, therefore, I regard any encounter with an image as an engagement with a process of decision-making by individuals who have 'something to say'. Those decisions ultimately become the content of the work. In addition to this, I should add that in any such activity a person reveals a set of values about what is, and is not, worth looking at. So, we might think of the photograph as an

expression of interest, in its most general sense. Whenever I press the shutter release on my camera, I'm expressing an interest in something or other, whether or not I can readily say why. Every photograph implicitly says "look at this". It's in the nature of the photograph to confer importance. Less obviously, every photograph also says, "look at this in this way". Photographs appear to have a truth-value and objectivity denied to other media (like painting). In that sense, they appear 'unmediated', as if that whole choice-making process did not exist, and the myth of photographic objectivity is a particularly stubborn piece of folklore. We need to reject any such oversimplistic ideas. All that a photograph really tells us is that someone was somewhere, and took a picture. The rest is open to interpretation.(1) Here, however, rather than trying to investigate this photograph's status as an accurate record, I want instead to begin an account of its origins. In the short space available, I will deal primarily with two questions: Why, in the 1840s, were Hill and Adamson so very interested in this young girl and the community to which she belonged? And why does she appear in their photograph in the way that she does?

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Sometimes entitled *Fisher Lassie and Child*, the photograph shows a young girl, perhaps about thirteen years old, holding a baby. The girl wears the typical striped overskirts of this fishing community and is, therefore, dressed in her working clothes. She sits barefoot on what appears to be a shingle beach, but the background is out of focus and, unfortunately, the paper negative of the Calotype process was better at creating atmosphere than it was at rendering precise detail. The Calotype produced a high contrast image and, to keep exposure times short, strong sunlight was preferred, making the contrast even stronger, and here the light from the right of the picture casts such deep shadow on the left that detail is still further suppressed. There is also a strong contrast between the sense of animation to be read in her face and the figure on her lap, which appears stiff, almost inanimate. I think I can detect a smile on the girl's face; after all, it can hardly have been an everyday experience for her to sit for a portrait for two gentlemen from Edinburgh, a place geographically close but socially distant from the world of Newhaven. But the reasons for that smile are by no means indisputable. Did Hill and Adamson request that their sitters should smile, thereby providing a more humanising and sympathetic

image of the people of Newhaven? Or, might what appears to be a smile have originated in a grimace occasioned by the strong sunlight? There is also the novelty of the camera itself, and few people of her social class would have experienced this new technology at first hand, so perhaps she was reacting more to the camera than to the photographers.

Today we might refer to the subject of the photograph as a child, but the term's modern connotations make this all too imprecise a term. Here we are talking about a young woman who has already taken up her place within the work of the community, sharing the responsibilities of childcare, presumably while the baby's mother is engaged elsewhere. Women were actively involved in the business of fishing, and they played an important and influential role in sustaining the community's future. The concept of childhood that we have inherited today, with its regulated phases of separate development in terms of play and schooling, was unknown in the early nineteenth century, certainly amongst the working classes. Children were young adults, and the roles they played were a restricted version of their future, adult work. In this sense, as a young worker and most likely a future mother herself, this young woman literally embodied the possibility of that community's continued existence, and this at a time when escaping from poverty in Scotland often meant emigration. The image of (usually older) women waiting on the beach, pensive or grieving over the fate of their men, was to become a familiar theme of late nineteenth-century genre painting. In this case too I feel prompted to recall far earlier images of the Virgin and the dead Christ (the fisher of men) in the figure of the pietà, while the photograph returns me to where it all began: the Nativity, with its emphasis on the Child being born and clothed in poverty.

It was probably these associations, and their relevance to a lively contemporary debate about work, poverty and morality, which drew Hill and Adamson to Newhaven. As the Scottish radical, Thomas Carlyle, remarked in 1839, coincidentally the year of the public announcement of the invention of photography: 'A feeling very generally exists that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said; something ought to be done, in regard to it.'⁽²⁾ Carlyle was writing on the phenomenon of social unrest represented by the Chartist movement and about the New Poor Law which, he believed,

threatened to legislate the destitute out of existence. Photography and the image of the working classes have been closely linked ever since. Hill and Adamson would have been familiar with the whole Chartist debate, having made a portrait of James Aytoun of Kircaldy, a Chartist candidate for Edinburgh for 1839-40, and Aytoun was one of numerous distinguished (usually male) dignitaries who sat for their camera. But sometime in 1844, Hill and Adamson advertised the publication of an album of photographs, entitled *The Fishermen and Women of the Firth of Forth*, which looked at the opposite end of Scottish society represented by the people of the fishing village of Newhaven. Although never actually published in this form, I take it that it is from this collection of pictures that our image derives. As a body of work, these images have long been viewed as the first ever attempt at a comprehensive photographic documentary of a community. As such, they come heavily burdened with a cultural weight that is still in the process of evaluation.

In a famous essay entitled 'Past and Present', published in 1843 while Hill and Adamson were busy at work in Newhaven, Carlyle commented on the poverty to be found in lowland Scotland in the following terms:

So many hundred thousands sit in workhouses: and other hundred thousands have not yet got even workhouses; and in thrifty Scotland itself, in Glasgow or Edinburgh City, in their dark lanes, hidden from all but the eye of God ... there are scenes of woe and destitution and desolation, such as, one may hope, the Sun never saw before in the most barbarous regions where men dwelt. (3)

Clearly, if Hill and Adamson had wanted to make images of destitution, there was no shortage of subjects within the Old Town, and only a short distance from their own studio. So far as I'm aware, there is no evidence that they had any such explicit, socio-political aim in mind. Instead, it appears they were interested in producing a commercially viable album of photographs with a far more positive theme. In Newhaven there was a thriving, self-sufficient, discrete and knowable community that was in marked contrast to Edinburgh's 'dark lanes' and 'scenes of woe'. Not only that, but here was a people who appeared to exist in some kind of symbiosis with Nature, unlike those new conscripts to the factory system who Carlyle believed to be fundamentally alienated from their labour. In this sense,

Newhaven represented a Scottish Pastoral ideal that underscored the failure of the new industrial age to provide either moral satisfaction or economic security. In the Pastoral the countryside is defined in opposition to the city. While the city is the site of poverty, disease, political unrest and moral corruption, the countryside is imagined to be a place of leisured activity where people live in harmony with Nature: the shepherd tending his flock, for example, or the fisherman who reaps the harvest of the sea. Historically, the Pastoral is invoked in periods of accelerated social change when the new threatens to replace older, more established ways of life.

In Newhaven, Hill and Adamson found a community that thrived on the periphery of the industrial age; a living reminder that an alternative way of life still survived. Their work was, therefore, nostalgic for a world that was fast disappearing. The concept of the Pastoral is interesting in other respects, however, because while it involves a profound nostalgia, it also involves a resistance to change, expressed as a desire to return to the perceived stability of the social order of the past; in this case, one free of the political unrest of the 1840s. The Pastoral was, then, a way of engaging with the lower classes in a form that was entirely unthreatening to Hill and Adamson's imagined audience. Indeed, the people of Newhaven appeared to lack any stigma or controversy. In the middle-class eyes of Hill and Adamson (and those of their prospective middle-class customers) this was a self-contained, virtuous, God-fearing, industrious, and 'heroic' community that, unlike either the Chartists or the ragged poor of Edinburgh, posed no threat to the existing order nor offended bourgeois sensibilities. Yet, in reaching across the divides of class, Hill and Adamson's images betray no condescension on their part, and suggest instead a close engagement with their subjects. The pair obviously gave their sitters close direction, as the Calotype process did not permit speedy use and, with a large camera on a tripod, there was no possibility of working unseen. Their nostalgia seems, therefore, humanising and benign.

One might speculate also about the extent to which Hill and Adamson were interested in their subjects as 'types'; as socio-economic representatives of a particular, pre-industrial life, rather than as individuals. In other words, to what degree is this image a portrait of an individual or a specimen of social life? Here

again, staring long and hard at our photograph is unlikely to bring us any nearer an answer. The concept of the type was informed by an attempt to understand, in abbreviated form, something of the variety of people to be encountered within the new cityscapes that were becoming typical of the modern, urbanising world. In its most advanced form, it aimed at making sense of the multitude of professions, trades, 'characters' and less salubrious occupants of the new, urban environment, and a typological method informed much documentary photographic activity of the period. The poorer, working-class areas of major cities were thought of as unknowable, as the abyss, and the idea of the type registers a level of middle-class disquiet about the need to accurately recognise, evaluate and perhaps avoid one's social inferiors.

The hard-working citizens of Newhaven, however, inhabited a small, pre-industrial community with which the new (and still pre-industrial) medium of photography could cope perfectly well, so the concept of the 'type' seems inappropriate here. Hill and Adamson appear to have gained the confidence of their subjects, who are frequently described with their full names. Accordingly, they are recognised as individual, social actors who are, nevertheless, representative of their community. In an important sense, these images prefigured (indeed inspired) Paul Strand's later photography in the Outer Hebrides, as well as sharing some of the concerns of documentary film-makers like Robert Flaherty and John Grierson. All these works demonstrate a kind of humanist religiosity and faith in human endeavour directly opposed to the homogenising and alienating tendencies of industrial Capitalism.

By way of a conclusion: in May, 1854, Carlyle wrote a lengthy letter to David Laing, at the Signet Library, Edinburgh, about a project for a national exhibition of Scottish portraits. In it, he complained at length about the unavailability of portraits from Scottish history and duly gave the endeavour his support. But Carlyle wrote only of painted portraits - remarkably, there is no mention of photography - and as a firm stricture to what might appear in this new collection he maintained that 'no living Scotchman's portrait should be admitted, however "Historical" it promised to be'. Carlyle also advised Laing 'that you should be extremely chary about such "Historical men" as have died within the last twenty-five or thirty years...'. (4) The

absence of any direct reference to contemporary figures or to any role for photography must surely qualify as one of Scotland's bigger, missed opportunities, and I will leave you with the thought of what might have resulted from a collaboration between Carlyle, Hill and Adamson. As Carlyle wrote in the same letter, in words that frustratingly allude to the very process he had omitted to mention:

If one would buy an indisputably authentic old shoe of William Wallace for hundreds of pounds, and run to look at it from all ends of Scotland, what would one give for an authentic visible shadow of his face, could such, by art natural or art magic, now be had! (5)

Clearly, Carlyle advocated an extremely restrictive idea of history based on the lives and deeds of 'Heroes' and 'Great Men'. As a young, working-class woman, however, Hill and Adamson's unknown sitter usefully points us to those who were to be left out of his celebration of Scotland's history and national character.

Endnotes

- 1 For a more developed explanation of this approach, see Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', in **Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present**. V.Goldberg (Ed.), Simon and Schuster, New York, 1981, pp 452-473.
- 2 Thomas Carlyle, **Chartism. Critical and Miscellaneous Essays**. Chapman and Hall, London, 1899, Vol IV, p 118.
- 3 Thomas Carlyle, **Past and Present**. Dent and Sons, London, 1941, pp 2-3.
- 4 Thomas Carlyle, **Project of a National Exhibition of Scottish Portraits. Critical and Miscellaneous Essays**. Chapman and Hall, London, 1899, Vol IV, p409.
- 5 Thomas Carlyle, **Project**. p406. Carlyle was later photographed to dramatic effect by Julia Margaret Cameron, a photographer deeply involved in continuing a Carlylean view of history formed largely by the activities of 'Great Men'.