

***The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885-1918.* Elizabeth Edwards. Duke University Press, 2012. 337 pp.\***

Reviewed by Joanna Scherer

The central theme of this book is a discourse on “the relationship between photography and historical imagination, especially the ways in which the latter is articulated and negotiated through the former, and through the agency of amateur photographers” (6). This discourse centers on “debates about the nature of photography and its role in the historical imagination of contemporaries, particularly concerns about the way in which photography could be harnessed as a form of collective cultural and historical memory for the benefit of the future” (xi). Edwards’ study “is an exploration, an historical ethnography, of these ideas, as they were articulated through the photographic survey movement of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth” (xi).

The title refers to a 1916 publication: *The Camera as Historian: A Handbook to Photographic Record Work for those Who Use a Camera and for Survey or Record Societies*. This book described the English photographic survey movement at its height from 1885-1918 and serves as the blueprint for hundreds of amateur British photographers who desired to document the remains of the past while these built environments were still in existence. The publication was “the culminating, utopian statement of the values and aspirations that had defined this amateur movement” (27). It set out detailed methodologies that ranged from fieldwork to the creation of archives for photography. The survey movement photographs, which were largely related to medieval, Tudor, and Stuart past, helped to shape the English historical imagination of these periods. They were intended to be the collective memory banks of material and associated immaterial remains.

Edwards’ book is divided into six primary chapters. “Amateur Photography and Imagining the Past,” which describes the rise of the movement in the 1880s with the desire to visually map and preserve subjects; “Amateur Photographers and the Survey and Record Movement” discusses the advent of Camera Clubs and the patterns of subjects selected, with the inherent tensions between historical objectivity and subjectivity of the photographers; “Practices of Evidence, Style and Archive” reflects on pictorial style vs. record photography, the sources of photographic meaning, and especially the fear of the loss of information through poor archival procedures, management and classification. “Local Histories and National Identities: shows the influence of nostalgia on survey photograph production, and the importance of placing these images in area libraries and museums from which the local images sometimes became national icons; “Photography, Disappearance and Survival” looks at the moral imperative to record old buildings (parish churches and rural villages) as well as ancient customs. The concern with salvaging the past and associated cultural survival/origins was articulated repeatedly in the rising illustrated press. This became a primary source for understanding the photographic survey oeuvre but ultimately raises the question of whose history emerges in these photos; and “Photographs as Public History” describes the critical role of photographs displayed in newspapers, magazines, exhibitions,

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illustrated guidebooks, postcards and lantern slide lectures that then became part of the collective cultural historical imagination. An appendix includes detailed information on survey rules, the objectives of the survey societies, list of the photographic surveys and classifications of subjects.

The illustrations are reproduced in an exceptional manner on top quality paper, with detailed clarity and original captions. The images are often shown in context, as pages of books and magazines with surrounding text, or as they appear on record cards in the archives with handwritten notes, labels and photographer's imprint. The importance of the archival recording system is thus stressed although the quality of the images reproduced does not suffer as it does in many publications. Thirty pages of notes provide the sources of the many quotes as well as additional information on individuals mentioned, contemporary publications and more recent scholarship for further study.

Edwards' research for this project focused on contemporary journals and the visual and textual archives left by the photographic surveys. She reviewed 73 surveys and worked extensively with 17 of them. She estimated that she looked at about 55 thousand images, taken by 1 thousand amateur photographers and found biographical information for about eighty percent of them (26). The sheer volume of the material she covered is staggering. She considers how the amateur photographers understood the value of their project, and links the surveys to concepts of leisure, understandings of local and national, and the rise of popular photography. She looks at how these photographers balanced scientific objectivity against aesthetic image considerations and how they were concerned with the creation of an archive of their photographic records, yet were nostalgic about the imaged past in their photographs.

Edward's interest in the relationship between photography and popular British history stems from her years of research as a visual and historical anthropologist working with colonial and anthropological images. The English survey photographs that she interprets gain meaning and scientific accuracy by becoming part of a collective, or "photographic complex." The author is most interested in looking at survey photography as cultural practice and succeeds in this goal; I am not sure how well her methodology will transfer to other archives of anthropological photographs. The text of this book is often verbally convoluted, but for those interested in English history from 1885-1918 this work is brilliant.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.14434/mar.v9i1-2.19183>