

William Henry Fox Talbot: Beyond Photography. Cambridge: British Library; Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), 24.06.2010-26.06.2010.

Reviewed by Mirjam Brusius

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Most people know William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) as a pioneer of early photography – but few realize the impact he had on Victorian culture generally. *Beyond Photography: William Henry Fox Talbot*, a three-day conference held at the University of Cambridge in June and co-funded by the British Academy, the Gerda Henkel Foundation, the Paul Mellon Centre for the Study of British Art, The Mellon Centre for Disciplinary Innovation (CDI) at CRASSH, The British Library and Trinity College Cambridge, attempted to set the record straight. Talbot's activities as a Victorian intellectual and 'gentleman of science' ranged widely across the natural sciences, classical scholarship and Assyriology. The interdisciplinary conference approached Talbot's work with this wider perspective in mind, bringing together art historians, curators, historians of science and practitioners of the many scholarly fields to which Talbot contributed. The papers and commentaries situated Talbot against the networks and institutions of Victorian intellectual enterprise, while raising basic questions about the relation between photography and these other fields. Previously unknown archive material was presented, and attracted more than 70 delegates from the UK and overseas. Organized jointly by the British Library and the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH), the conference drew on the Talbot archive at the British Library.

The aim of this event was to reinvigorate scholarly work on Talbot – a central figure in the history of photography – by experimenting with a new multi-disciplinary approach to his work for an edited volume (Yale UP 2012). The conference brought together two communities of scholars: on the one hand, historians of nineteenth-century science and culture, many of whom conducted new research into the British Library's large archive of Talbot's notebooks and diaries but who often had only passing familiarity with Talbot's photographic oeuvre; and on the other hand, art historians and historians of photography for whom Talbot's images form a foundational element of their disciplinary canon, but who had little knowledge of his other intellectual activities. A set of important themes emerged and recurred throughout the two days of the conference and in the commentaries and discussions at the end of each day:

The "social geography" of Victorian intellectual life. Talbot's social position and his wide range of interests seem to make him a particularly useful subject for illuminating the socially heterogeneous landscape of nineteenth-century knowledge in terms of issues of class, skill, expertise, training, and discipline – terms central to the social history of the period. The meaning of Lacock Abbey (Talbot's country estate) as a social, political, intellectual, technological, and archival site has not yet been fully explored. Was Talbot a

“centrifugal” figure with subjects and information moving outwards, or flowing inwards towards him? The telling absence of the “oriental” (especially India) as one of Talbot’s interests was also raised, as was the question of his religious orthodoxy, especially with respect to his various projects dealing with the past and with ancient religions.

What did we mean by “beyond” photography? Values having to do with the proper or enjoyable exercise of vision/visual judgment (such as visual acuity, discrimination, pleasure, and connoisseurship) arose in a few of the papers, and suggested ways of examining connections or productive tensions between Talbot’s photographic work and his other activities. A question which frequently arose between the lines but which was never answered was the relationship between classic iconographic readings of Talbot’s photographs, and the scientific and intellectual context of photography’s invention.

Talbot’s abiding interest in origins, as well as a persistent fascination with languages, script and inscription, decipherment, and legibility, are themes that seem to have cut across several of his intellectual activities (antiquarianism, archaeology, etymology, Assyriology, as well as photography). It would also be useful to explore the political and theological valence of Talbot’s various projects dealing with the past. Many papers also called attention to the materiality of record-keeping and research practices for nineteenth-century intellectuals like Talbot, and to the materiality of the Talbot archive itself. Moreover, like the scientist and celebrated polymath William Whewell, Talbot seems to be a useful lens through which to examine the tendency of Victorian intellectuals (particularly reforming Whigs) to value the cultivation of omniscience, and to seek to understand and control many different aspects of knowledge and society at once. Finally, certain key terms with highly unstable meaning in the period under study (and which currently have a highly ossified

meaning in early twenty-first-century scholarly discourse) repeatedly arose in our discussions: “discovery”, “invention”, “discipline”, “professional”, “aesthetics”. Because Talbot’s wide range of activities and interests took place during a crucial period in the intellectual development and social formation of Victorian knowledge systems, when even such seemingly basic terms as “art” and “science” were in flux, it is precisely these terms that we need to be careful not to deploy uncritically in our analysis.

The conference successfully used historical studies of Talbot and his scientific and intellectual context to explore the discursive relations among art, science, and photography in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless it can be stated that further clarification will certainly be needed in respect to the historiography and meta-narrative of the conference. Towards the end of the event the question was raised of what exactly was the nature of the historiographical intervention we were attempting to make with this conference and the publication arising out of it. Is the aim to bring biographical coherence to Talbot studies, or to disperse him as a subject across different fields? Related to this concern is the question of whether to think of Talbot as a “typical” or an “exceptional” Victorian intellectual, a question which recurred throughout the discussions and was not fully answered. Despite the many questions that remained open for now, the event demonstrated that careful studies of the social, scientific, and intellectual context of photography’s invention can bring new insights to the history of photography, science and art alike.

Conference overview:

Keynote Lecture

James Elkins (School of the Art Institute of Chicago): The Variable Relation of Photography and Science

Introduction: Paul Binski (Faculty of Architecture and History of Art, University of Cambridge)

Conference Introduction

Katrina Dean, John Falconer and Mirjam Brusius (The British Library): Lacock Abbey and the country house archive/The Talbot Collection at the British Library/Talbot's notebooks. A short survey

Keynote lecture

Larry J. Schaaf (Baltimore, Maryland): Lady Elisabeth's Henry

Introduction: Jennifer Tucker (Weslyan University)

Session 1: Foundations: Mathematics and Antiquity

Chair: Steve Edwards (The Open University)

Tony Crilly (University of Middlesex): Talbot and the Cambridge Tripos

David Gange (Cambridge Victorian Studies Group, University of Cambridge): The Antiquity of Genesis and the Origins of Civilisation

Session 2: Knowledge Practices: Observation and Notetaking

Chair: Katrina Dean (The British Library)

John van Wyhe (University of Cambridge/National University of Singapore): Making Scientific Notes in the 19th Century: The Notebooks of Darwin and Wallace

Anne Secord (University of Cambridge): Talbot's First Lens: Botanical Vision as an Exact Science

Session 3: Gentlemanly Pursuits: Antiquarianism and Literature

Chair: Roger Watson (Fox Talbot Museum, Lacock Abbey)

Mirjam Brusius (University of Cambridge/The British Library): Preserving the Forgotten: Talbot and the Antique

Graham Smith (University of St. Andrews): In Scott's Shadow: Talbot and the Wizard of the North

Commentary and discussion

(chair as above)

James A. Secord (Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge)

Session 4: Tracing Origins: Etymology and Decipherment

Chair: David Gange (Wolfson College/Cambridge Victorian Studies Group, University of Cambridge)

Anatoly Liberman (University of Minnesota): Talbot as a Student of Word Origins

Eleanor Robson (University of Cambridge): Bel, the Dragon, and Henry Fox Talbot: deciphering cuneiform after decipherment

Session 5: Image and inscription in Talbot's Scientific Network

Chair: Kelley Wilder (DeMontfort University, Leicester)

Chitra Ramalingam (CRASSH, University of Cambridge): The Most Transitory of Things: Talbot and the Optics of the Instantaneous Image

Frank James (Royal Institution, London): Images of Faraday: Photography at the Royal Institution

Session 6: Re-reading "The Pencil of Nature"

Chair: Roger Taylor (De Montfort University, Leicester)

Vered Maimon (Hebrew University of Jerusalem): Talbot's Art of Discovery

Robin Kelsey (Harvard University): The Photograph as Sign in The Pencil of Nature

Commentary and final discussion

Chair: Chitra Ramalingam (CRASSH, University of Cambridge)

Simon Schaffer (Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Cambridge)

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