



Empire, Early Photography and Spectacle: The Global Career of Showman Daguerreotypist J.W. Newland

Elisa DeCourcy and Martyn Jolly. Routledge, London and New York, 2020. 190 pages, with 8 colour and 56 black & white illustrations. Hardcover \$282.00, ISBN 978-1-350-13036-4.

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Review

Empire, Early Photography and Spectacle: The Global Career of Showman Daguerreotypist J.W. Newland
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The scope of this book is well encapsulated by its title. At one level it traces the career of James William Newland (1810–57), one of the nineteenth century's many itinerant photographers who was also one of that century's many small-time showmen. At another, however, it is an impressively detailed history of the daguerreotype and its associated technologies; for Newland was not just a highly skilled studio photographer, he was also a talented and inventive purveyor of 'dissolving views shows', the term for the performance-based visual spectacles that derived from panoramas, dioramas and phantasmagorias and that evolved into modern cinema.

A third level that is just as powerfully invoked, however, is that of the swiftly burgeoning commercial world of photography that was opening up across the British Empire as this existed from the 1840s to the 1860s in those parts of the Pacific world that Newman passed through on his way from New Orleans in the American South to his final destination of Calcutta in British-occupied India. Indeed, by positioning Newland's career and his works within the popular cultural networks that were a feature of the nineteenth century, *Empire, Early Photography and Spectacle* demonstrates the powerful role that photography and its associated technologies played in communicating ideas about Empire compared to fine art paintings and even literature.

DeCourcy and Jolly have produced what we might call a 'thick' history both of the media itself and of the places and times in which Newland worked. This is because the emphasis is on the broad social and cultural contexts and effects as well as the webs of significance that surrounded Newland's inventory, and not so much on the images' contents. The authors claim to privilege biography as their methodology. As they write in the introduction, 'biography is the only methodological framework which encompasses a study of Newland as a multimedia artist and as a traveller, exhibitor, businessman and self promoter'. However, in their case what they call biography is broadly defined, extending as it does to a consideration of the main economic and cultural transnational forces that helped produce the first wave of globalisation that lasted from 1800 to 1914. As the authors themselves explain, focusing on the figure of 'Newland allows us to stitch the visual economy of daguerreotypes, published prints and dissolving-views exhibitions into larger economies of migration, trade and power'.

Geoffrey Batchen describes the authors as developing 'a new way of understanding the early history of photography', one that emphasises the global network of spectacle and exchange that was such a dominant feature of the colonial world as it existed around the time when Newland was working. In order to bring this global network of spectacle and exchange into view, Jolly and deCourcy populate their narrative with what they call the 'the microhistories of biography', to describe the many figures around Newland, both those he collaborated with and those who

influenced or paralleled his daguerreotype practice and showmanship. However, there are many other figures mentioned besides these. The text reads like a veritable encyclopaedia of the many photographers who were working in the same cities that Newland toured on his transnational trajectory from New Orleans, Valparaisu in Peru, Tahiti, the Bay of Islands in New Zealand, Sydney and Hobart to Calcutta. But it is also a record of some of the more colourful characters who sat for Newland's camera and who appeared either in daguerreotype form or in the many engraved illustrations that were based on his original images, examples of which include Tahiti's Queen Pōmare IV, the heavily tattooed New Zealanders that Newland photographed during his two-day stopover in the Bay of Islands and Hemi Pōmare, the grandson of Pomara, the Chief of the Chatham islands, who was placed on display in the Egyptian court at London's Crystal Palace. The fact that Newland had only fleeting encounters with many of these peoples does not detract from their importance to the narrative since they serve to powerfully evoke the tumultuous events occurring in the places he journeyed through, together with the public's mounting taste for photographs of 'exotic looking natives'.

The discursive nature of these microhistories sets the tone for the book's illustrations. Of the book's fifty-six illustrations and eight coloured plates, only twelve are of photographs by Newland himself, the rest being by his contemporaries or printed illustrations. These function as a vital complement to what little remains of the original Newland archive, a large portion of which was of townscape scenes, archaeological vistas and monuments together with portraits of military officers, colonial agents and the well-heeled inhabitants of British outposts. Newland was working at a time when photographic methods and materials were not as robust as they were in later times. Daguerreotypes, for example, were so delicate that they had to be housed behind a thin sheet of glass and encased in small, leather-coated metal boxes. They were also unique images. In the case of Newland, his original archive consisted of his 'Daguerreotype Gallery' – the name for the collection of roughly two hundred daguerreotypes that accompanied him everywhere and which he used to advertise his 'superior' skills as a photographer. Due to the wear and tear of packing and unpacking such intrinsically fragile objects, not to mention the damage done by the vicissitudes of time, only a tiny fraction of this gallery now remains.

Among the book's many plate illustrations are some striking examples of the kind of visual media informing what the authors describe as 'the smorgasbord of spectacular entertainments' that featured in London and which were also beginning to be performed across the globe. Ostensibly mechanical productions, these comprised displays of hand-painted magic-lantern slides of various kinds, including those that featured dissolving views of exotic, far-away places and scenes. Although the examples of dissolving-views slides that feature in the book are not by Newland himself, they have been carefully selected on the basis of their physical beauty and close resemblance to Newland's own slides. More even than the examples of daguerreotypes presented among these pages, they testify to the exquisite craftsmanship of this early photographic technology while also enabling us to glimpse something of the dreamlike, phantasmagorical effects they were able to project. But lantern slides and daguerreotypes comprise only some of the plates. Those featuring reproductions of stereoscopes, advertising posters and bills, and other kinds of objects and goods demonstrate the extent to which Newland's life and career were animated by the many diverse forms of exchange that were opening up across the colonial world in the 1840s and 1850s.

A real strength of *Empire, Early Photography and Spectacle* is its carefully structured and elegantly written introduction. This covers Newland's life and death, what is known of his biographical details, his use of multimedia, his relation to

other transnational lives and to imperial networks, the materiality of his photography and how it connected to his audiences' experience of visual objects and cultures, and how studying the life and works of Newland can lead to a whole new way of rethinking about early photography. Together with the authors' extraordinarily detailed knowledge of the photographic technologies of the time, this makes for an edifying reading experience. Particularly striking in this regard are the descriptions of the various apparatuses that Newland invented to create the spectacular visual shows he staged while living and working in Calcutta. It is not just the author's fine-grained knowledge of past photographic practices and technologies that impresses, however. The reader is also offered a fine demonstration of how to weave elements of contemporary photographic theory into the narrative in a way that helps illuminate the significance of Newland's inventions for contemporary readers.

While the book provides a brilliantly detailed account of the history of the daguerreotype and the nineteenth-century views shows that catered to the era's vogue for visual spectacle, it could be said to be somewhat light in its treatment of Newland's life. For instance, we never learn whether Newland married or had children, whether he was from the British lower, middle or upper classes, or even why he left England for the USA. This is no doubt partly a function of the period itself, for Newland was working at time when few official records of people's lives were kept and indeed, as the authors explain, all that is known of his family background is his mother's name and the fact that he was her first child and of illegitimate birth. But it may also have been partly a function of the highly competitive nature of Newland's profession and his itinerant lifestyle, for these meant that he had neither the time nor space to keep records pertaining to his private life or indeed his business. Indeed, the picture that emerges of him is of a man who was not just one of the most hardworking photographers and showmen of his time – he was also one of the most talented and entrepreneurial.

In summary, the wide range of media and historical incidents covered by *Empire, Early Photography and Spectacle* together with the book's in-depth research render it a valuable resource for scholars of both past and contemporary visual media. This book will also appeal to all those interested in the various visual apparatuses and optical technologies that contributed to the growth both of colonialism and the cultures of entertainment in first half of the nineteenth century.

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