

## Julia Margaret Cameron: An Appraisal

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Julia Margaret Cameron is one of the few, perhaps the only, 19th century photographer whose reputation has remained consistently high since her own lifetime. Unlike other photographers of the previous century her work has not known a slump, or a period of forgetfulness, or even a time of unfashionable regard. On any criterion of critical appraisal, Julia Margaret Cameron remains the most popular photographer of her, or any other, age in the medium's history.

In the past three years at least nine books have been published which deal totally with her life and work, and practically every other anthology of the history of photography contains her biography, reproduces one or more of her photographs, or refers to her as a sort of touchstone of photographic quality. There are hundreds of essays and articles in print which extol her charm, aggression, eccentricity, talent, tenacity and ability to produce photographic portraits that shattered conventional and contemporaneous standards of merit. In the face of so many millions of words of adulation and forelock-tugging obeisance to her 'genius', it is with tentativeness and some sense of Quixotic foolishness that any critic would endeavor to reexamine her stature with a coldly analytical eye. And it must be admitted at the outset that it is difficult to approach Cameron or her work directly, buried as they are under the debris of passive praise.

The critic's mind, if there has been any long term involvement in the literature of the medium, is stuffed full of the words that surround her images, until the photographs themselves can only be seen through a smog of arcadian romance, tingeing each fact, each image, each album with a cozy glow of uncritical acceptance. What is needed so desperately within the medium today is a healthy blast of cold air that will dispel the haze and give us clearer, cleaner, sharper appraisals of the 'masters' of the medium. This is the critic's function and his challenge. Unfortunately, I must agree with Henry Holmes Smith that "intelligent critical literature on photographs is barely discernible" (1).

The critic tends to approach the subject, the photographer's work, as if the individual prints were isolated phenomena. That is, each new article is treated as if it were a new beginning - a reaction to images like the jerk of a frog leg on application of an electric shock to a nerve. This might lead, and has led, to some apt observations, but the process is a hit and miss affair. What is needed so urgently is an overall philosophy by a critic who has taken a stance towards the medium *as a whole*, who, from analysis and deductions from individual bodies of work throughout the medium's history, has formulated a life-attitude towards photography that is clearly recognizable, and within which his approach to a particular work can be seen more brightly illuminated in this new context.

The alternative is a critical approach that resembles a stroboscopic flicker in which the subjects jerk like puppets at the writer's whim. The critic with isolated flickers of insight acts like a psychologist who attempts to understand each patient with a separate, one-to-one approach. This seems reasonable. Each patient (body of work) is unique and demands individualized responses and suggestions. The psychologist, and critic, is as good as the level of understanding which he can bring to the subject. But there are greater psychologists who, as well as treating their field as a series of separate confrontations, have joined the individual experiences into a pattern. Believing the validity of their deductions, they have formulated their own responses into a philosophy. Such psychologists would include Freud, Jung, James, Adler, Frankl, Maslow and so on. Other media

and fields of specialization have their own formulations of frameworks deduced from individual experience and reapplied in strengthened form to future individual experiences. The medium of photography does not have such philosopher-critics, whose approaches transcend styles, movements, groups and historical periods. That is the pressing need of photography today.

We need critics who have immersed themselves in the medium; analyzed the facts, felt the nuances, examined the implications; stepped back into an objective, private self and fitted this data into a personal pattern of philosophy; and reentered the medium with a critical base on which to build value judgments. That is the hope of this writer when reading the appraisals by other critics; this has been my attempt in evaluating the contribution of Julia Margaret Cameron.

But first it is important to briefly sketch the main lines of Cameron's biography and career within photography. Julia Margaret Cameron was born in Calcutta, India, in 1815, the second oldest daughter of James Pattle of the Bengal Civil Service. Pattle had nine daughters and one son, but only seven of the girls reached maturity. They were known as the "beautiful Pattle sisters" - except for Julia who was regarded as the ugly duckling of the family, although she possessed intelligence, energy and ebullience which more than compensated for her physical shortcomings compared to her sisters. She was certainly eccentric and it is interesting to speculate how much her disregard for convention was inherited or modeled on her father, who was considered the biggest liar in India and who drank himself to death. Not that Julia was destructive in her impulses, in fact her overwhelming generosity and affection were later to become legendary.

After schooling in England and France, she returned to India at the age of 21. Two years later, in 1838, Julia Margaret Cameron married Charles Hay Cameron, a man 20 years her senior.

Charles Cameron was a distinguished lawyer who occupied a position at the top of the hierarchy in British India. After sitting on various legal and charitable commissions in England, Cameron was sent to Ceylon to prepare a report, which was published in 1832, on "judicial establishment and procedure". During the following years he became the first English member of the East India Company's law commission which ruled India, President of the Council for Education for Bengal, a member of the Supreme Council of India, an owner of coffee plantations and a highly respected member of the social elite. During this time Julia Margaret was raising her own family and, most important, developing a social flair, if not imperiousness, which was to stand her in good stead in later years, on her return to the rigid social structure of Victorian England.

In 1844 a new Governor, Sir Henry Hardinge, arrived in India without his wife. This meant that Julia became the leading lady of Government House, and the most prominent hostess in English society in India. But this was not to last. Charles Cameron had been far-sighted, but politically unwise, in staunchly advocating education for Indians, a stand that was mistrusted both by the East India Company and the Colonial office. This fact, coupled with his ill health and an assurance of income from his plantations, precipitated an early retirement, and the Camerons decided to return to England in 1848.

They first lived in Tunbridge Wells and became close friends with their neighbor Sir Henry Taylor, a Colonial office official, an accomplished minor poet, and destined to become one of the most photographed of the eminent Victorians. For the next few years Julia Margaret Cameron extended her list of acquaintances with the great, 'headhunting' in the most unabashed manner with flattery, generosity and the sheer volume of her affections. She deluged the eminent Victorians with letters, gifts, and insistent tokens of admiration. With anyone else such lionizing would not only seem degrading but likely to cause ridicule and rejection by her 'victims'. Yet Julia's smothering sincerity was quickly seen to be a natural overflow of her own hot energies; her devotions were tolerated more or less uncomplainingly by her new friends. Henry Taylor wrote that "Mrs. Cameron has driven herself home to us by a power of loving which I have never seen exceeded..." G. F. Watts and Alfred Tennyson, were among the others who were driven to love Mrs. Cameron by this

unstoppable force.

In 1859, during a return trip by Henry Cameron to his estates in Ceylon, Julia visited the Tennysons at their home on the Isle of Wight. She fell in love with Freshwater, a village on the island. Seemingly on impulse, she bought two houses, joining them together with a newly built tower. She called the resultant mansion 'Dimbola Lodge', after one of the family estates in Ceylon. The significance of Freshwater should be noted at this point. The Isle of Wight, on which it is located, is a small island, about 20 miles long by 10 miles wide, off the southern coast of England. In 1860 it was a haven of peace and tranquility, with rolling meadows and no industry. Queen Victoria had a summer home, Osborne House, on the island, design and construction of which was supervised by Prince Albert. The island had a reputation as an artist's colony of the most respectable sort. One visitor in 1860 remarked: "Everybody is either a genius, or a poet, or a painter, or peculiar in some way. Is there nobody commonplace?" (2)

These 'peculiar' people were soon added to Mrs. Cameron's list of potential 'sitters', even though she had not yet begun her photographic activity. Another source was her younger sister's home in London. Sarah had married Henry Thoby Prinsep, an outstanding Indian civil servant, whose home in Kensington became a meeting place for literary and artistic lions. This house became Julia's London headquarters, from which she could fraternize with those men whom she most admired. In retrospect it does seem as if Julia Margaret Cameron was amassing a formidable collection of specimens who would later be her photographic subjects; certainly she was unconsciously preparing herself for a mammoth photographic project as soon as her mind met the medium.

Late in 1863, Charles Cameron made another visit to his estates in Ceylon, and during his second absence, his wife visited her daughter Julia and her husband in a suburb of London. It was during this visit that a momentous event took place. Julia presented her mother with a camera, and all the accompanying equipment and chemicals for the collodion or wet-plate process, with the words: "It may amuse you, mother, to try to photograph during your solitude at Freshwater."

Mrs. Cameron had first heard about photography from her close friend Sir John Herschel, who had written to her in Calcutta about the new process. (3) They had met in 1837, while Herschel was visiting the Cape during a period of convalescence. He also met Charles Cameron at about the same time. It is possible that Herschel introduced the couple; it is certain that he was godfather to the Cameron's first child, and only daughter, Julia. It is an interesting coincidence that Julia, born in the year of photography's announcement to the public (1839) should not only have a godfather who was an independent inventor of the medium, but also should be instrumental in beginning her mother's involvement with photography. While on the subject of minor coincidences, it is interesting to note that Mrs. Cameron's first successful photograph was made 25 years, almost to the day, after the first public announcement of the birth of photography. (4) Most readers of this essay will be familiar with the intricacies of operating the wet-plate process and will appreciate what a formidable task Mrs. Cameron had set for herself to master the technique. In fact, she never did conquer all the problems inherent in the process, much to the chagrin of the purist critics who reviewed her work at exhibitions. Her struggles and fears of the collodion process are vividly recreated in her own words in an unfinished autobiography which she titled Annals of My Glass House, (5) written in 1874.

From January 1864 until November 1875, when the Camerons returned to Ceylon, Julia Margaret Cameron was indefatigable in her photographic pursuits. It is from this decade that the vast majority of her images emerged. Technically, these images were less than perfect, as the photographic press was quick to spot, but Mrs. Cameron had no time nor patience for the finicky mastery of details; she was after the grand effect which she bludgeoned rather than caressed into existence. The resultant prints were often stained, spotted with dust marks, streaked with uneven coatings of collodion, even cracked - but no matter, if the final image met her own criteria of success. Before discussing these photographs it is worth completing the biographical details. In

1875 Charles Cameron decided to return to his Ceylon estates, this time permanently.

The Camerons returned to England in 1878, but only for a brief visit. In Ceylon, Julia Margaret Cameron occasionally took photographs of visitors or of the Indian natives, but essentially her work was over. She died in 1879 at the age of 63.

It should be understood that the former facts are not intended as a definitive biography, or even a very complete one. The reader should consult one of the many biographies available, particularly the monograph by Helmut Gernsheim, first published in 1948 but recently expanded and reissued by Aperture. But this information will serve as a framework for a discussion Cameron's contribution to the medium of photography, and an appraisal of the merit of her images.

And the specific question to be asked and answered, is: was Julia Margaret Cameron a great artist, as is asserted by so many? Cutting through the tangle of market-hype, slashing apart the piles of praise heaped uncritically upon her work, delving deeply into the core of her life-attitudes expressed photographically, we can attempt a definitive answer if we first define what we mean by "artist" and "great". Both these words are charged with connotations that have led to massive hemorrhages of energy from the body-photographic. Endless (or seemingly so) debates have raged over the art-nature of photography. The medium has been defined, analyzed, categorized, described and its images segregated into movements, styles, camps and ideologies *ad infinitum, ad absurdum*. The result is chronic confusion over the nature of the medium. It is time to understand that such confusion is inevitable as long as we persist in clinging to two basic misconceptions about photography.

It is a misconception to believe that photographic styles and movements have played any significant role in the development of the medium. It is a misconception to assume that a photograph can be understood from the appearance of the image. Yet what a photograph *looks like* is the basis of practically all photographic criticism to date. Therefore we cannot conclude that a photograph is art or not-art from any technical, stylistic, or process-oriented criteria. We must delve below the surface appearance of the print and examine the motive of the photographer. At this level, the issue is clear. It seems to me that there are two basic attitudes worth considering: neither of which is based on the appearance of the photographic image. Those attitudes can be labeled Naturalism or Humanism. (6)

The Naturalistic photograph states WHAT IS

The Humanistic photograph states WHAT COULD/SHOULD BE

Photography was born and nurtured in an atmosphere of naturalism. The ability of the camera to transcribe reality so intently and accurately and dispassionately not only fulfilled man's artistic quest since the Renaissance, but also appeared at exactly the right moment to complement a cultural need. The need that catalyzed the introduction of such a documentation process was the urgent interest in the close observation of *facts* of the material world. The early 1800s were marked by a surge of excitement for categorizations, listings, statistics, data production. The Victorians were fanatical in their passion for collecting details of the physical world. Meaning could wait; the facts, and millions of them, were needed now. Their only satisfaction was a sharp, clear, close-up of the physical world, seen not in its entirety but from a conglomeration of detail. No wonder that the microscope, telescope and camera were such indispensable tools of the age. Photography was, and is, the ideal instrument for examination, for documenting *what is*. Photography matured in this hothouse atmosphere of data-collecting. This ideal of a clinically objective, uncompromisingly clear, nonjudgmental examination of the thing itself is the essence of naturalistic photography. In this sense, most of the major naturalistic images are socially and culturally of equal importance; there is no hierarchy.

A photograph, in order to be art, must transcend 'what is'; it must give us more than a depiction of the facts or a delineation of the surface appearance of the subject. This extra ingredient is the life-

attitude of the photographer And here is the essence of humanistic photography. In order to make photographs that stand as icons for an ideal, the image maker must impose value judgments; in order to make value judgments he or she must have a particular attitude to life itself, beyond the desire to collect information. This attitude is the photographer's personal relationship with reality. This is the real subject of the resultant images, not the material objects as they exist; even though they might appear to be *of* something or someone, they are *about* the photographer as a transmitter of messages through metaphor. The photographer who works from a position of moral volition produces a body of work which *as a whole* reveals the author's value judgments. For this reason it is next to impossible to gauge a photographer's intent from the appearance of a single image. In photography, quantity is as important as quality. But from the photographer's total production it becomes very clear whether the intent was to reveal value judgments, in which case he or she can be deemed a humanist. There are very few humanists in 19th century photography, a medium that by its very nature is conducive to facts rather than philosophies. The conclusion of these remarks is that in any examination of a photographer's body of work the individual's *motive* must be of paramount concern.

The humanistic photograph is made by a photographer who, working from a deep-rooted sense of self, pervades the work with value judgments. Photography for the humanist becomes a moral act, not a method of gathering facts. The humanistic photograph is not of any particular subject, and owes no allegiance to any movement, group or style, process or appearance. It is individualistic and far more likely to arouse controversy because, by definition, it is dealing with one person's life-attitudes. Photography is by its intrinsic characteristics more suitable to a naturalistic approach. Therefore, the humanistic photograph is rare. It is not fashionable, is impossible to categorize by style, is radical in spirit, and promotes confusion by its refusal to be labeled with the tag of accepted criteria operating in the contemporaneous *zeitgeist*.

We are now in a position to examine the work of Julia Margaret Cameron in this context. Her motive was decidedly artistic as opposed to naturalistic. She made her position abundantly clear in a letter to Sir John Herschel (7) in which she fervently hopes that photography will be seen...

...in that spirit which will elevate it and induce an ignorant public to believe in other than mere conventional topographic photography - map making and skeleton rendering of feature and form without that roundness and fullness of force and feature that modelling of flesh and limb which the focus I use only can give tho' called and condemned as "*out of focus*." What is focus - and who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus - my aspirations are to ennoble Photography and to secure for it the character and uses of High Art by combining the real and ideal and sacrificing nothing of truth by all possible devotion to poetry and beauty. [Cameron's emphasis]

Mrs. Cameron has made her commitment, even though she had only been making photographs for one year when the letter was written. In her aspiration to combine "the real and ideal" and her implied denunciation of the "mere conventional topographic photography" she has allied herself with the artist rather than the naturalist. She again refers to the naturalistic portrait and compares it, unfavorably, to her own efforts in a revealing passage from Annals of My Glass House. She describes taking "another immortal head", that of Alfred Tennyson, sometimes called the Dirty Monk portrait:

The Laureate has since said of it that he likes it better than any photograph that has been taken of him except one by Mayall; that 'except' speaks for itself. The comparison seems too comical. It is rather like comparing one of Madame Tussaud's Waxwork Heads to one of Woolner's Ideal Heroic Busts.

It is evident, too, that Julia had no doubt of her own self-worth, and how her own portraits compared with those by other photographers, even those by such well-known practitioners as Mayall. And she

was correct in her analysis. If one collects together a body of work by the best known portraitists of the 19th century - photographers such as Bassano, Lock and Whitfield, W. and D. Downey, Elliott and Fry, Hughes and Mullins, and Mayall - it is remarkable how interchangeable is their work. These photographers were primarily interested in depicting the *appearance* of their sitters in a naturalistic spirit. Technical virtuosity was applauded, as long as it did not detract from the delineation of detail. By comparison, Julia Cameron's heads are conspicuous by their unconventional treatment. A 'Cameron' is instantly recognizable for its spirit rather than for its fact. She affirmed:

When I have such great men before my camera, my whole soul has endeavoured to do its duty towards them in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the outer man. (8)

But it was not only the naturalistic photographers with whom Mrs. Cameron favorably compared herself. She had no tolerance for H. P. Robinson, the high-priest of High Art compositions. In May 1865, she had sent a number of photographs to the Edinburgh Photographic Society. She did not receive a prize - but Robinson did. In Annals of My Glass House she wrote:

I sent some Photographs to Scotland - a Head of Henry Taylor with the light illuminating the countenance in a way that cannot be described, a Raphaelesque Madonna called La Madonna Aspettante. These Photographs still exist and I think they cannot be surpassed - They did not receive the prize. The picture that did receive the prize, called Brenda, clearly proved to me that detail of Table cover, chair and crinoline skirt were essentials to the Judges of the Art, which was then in its Infancy - Since that miserable specimen, the author of Brenda (Henry Peach Robinson) has so greatly improved that I am content to compete with him and content that those who value fidelity and manipulation should find me still behind him. Artists however immediately crowned me with laurels and though 'Fame' is pronounced 'the last infirmity of noble minds', I must confess that when those whose judgement I revered have valued and praised my works, 'My heart has leapt up like a rainbow in the sky and I have renewed all my zeal'.

In later years, referring to the episode, P.H.Emerson would write: "Had Mrs. Cameron been well advised she would never had entered for these contemptible exhibitions; the judges were incompetent, her competitors beneath contempt, and her public uneducated." (9)

It must be self-evident that in naturalism, the critical emphasis must be on the medium of *photography*, the intrinsic characteristics of the medium that contribute towards its ability to make documents, to gather data, of the objective reality. This stance towards the medium does not obviate a discussion of aesthetics since it is undeniable that many naturalistic photographs are also fine images aesthetically. But it is an aesthetics with a critical approach based on process, technique or rules of composition. It is an aesthetic stance that is dictated by contemporaneous convention of what a good photograph should look like. It is therefore evident that the humanistic photographs of Mrs. Cameron, the merit of which is based on a widely different set of criteria, would be disliked by her peers, rooted as they were in a spirit of naturalism. Photographs that were blurred through subject movement or due to inaccurate focusing would be considered 'inartistic'. Even this confusion in terminology is indicative of the naturalistic approach when dealing with the humanistic image. It was typical that photographic critics, when reviewing Mrs. Cameron's photographs, would not only dislike their lack of conventional 'quality' but also soften their anger with mild expressions of praise. They were confused. They recognized the power of her imagery but could not condone their lack of naturalistic qualities; they talked about art but in the spirit of documents. The following reviews are typical:

Mrs. Julia Margaret Cameron contributes a series of portrait studies which have a very distinctive character of their own - But as one of the especial charms of photography

consists in its completeness, detail, and finish, we can scarcely commend works in which the aim appears to have been to avoid these qualities. The force and sketchiness of the picture will unquestionably interest, but whilst they exhibit power they fail in that which is the real strength and excellence of photography. (10)

There is, in many cases, much evidence of art feeling... Not even the distinguished character of some of the heads serve, however, to redeem the result of willfully imperfect photography from being altogether repulsive. [This review continues to say that one portrait of the Poet Laureate, Tennyson, "Presents him in a guise which would be sufficient to convict him, if he were charged as a rogue and vagabond, before any bench of magistrates in the kingdom.] (11)

...her work does possess an amount of art feeling which claims attention and admiration on the ground of its suggestiveness, and makes the faults the more lamentable... admitting for a moment the art excellence we feel the more bound to protest against the technical shortcomings...The undoubted suggestive beauties of many of these pictures only renders more lamentable the disregard of technical excellence... (12)

...the author of these character portraits has expressed more of sentiment than of photographic or artistic skill. (13)

The contradictions implicit in these reviews indicate the critic's difficulty in dealing with a photographic stance that was not based on the accepted notions of good photography. The writers, as were the vast majority of their colleagues and readers, were naturalists with aesthetic pretensions and not true artists expressing a personal manifesto. It is not surprising therefore that they were unable to equate Mrs. Cameron's individuality with their own expectations. They could recognize the power of the images but not understand that its source was in the photographer and not in the technique. While they persisted in looking for artistic merit in photographic "quality" they were asking for confusion.

A few reviews were openly hostile and could see no mitigating factors which would soften their abuse. The Photographic Journal commented that: "In these photographs...Mrs. Cameron does herself and the art she employs alike injustice." (14) But my favorite piece of invective was published in The British Journal of Photography in 1873. Mrs. Cameron had sent a selection of her portraits to an exhibition in Vienna. The magazine's review eventually noticed her prints:

For Mrs. Cameron's heads there must be some excuse made for their being the work of a woman; but even this does not necessitate such fearlessly bad manipulation as the majority of these heads and figures show. Fog and dirty plates, and bad development, and unnecessary feebleness, even after all these faults had been included, characterise the majority of the exhibit. The head of Darwin, the naturalist, is fine as a portrait and fair as a photograph. The portrait of Herschel, bad as a photograph, is fine as a portrait and effective. But for the so-called art-photographs it is impossible to find any terms of praise. They are weak and thin; the fancy in them is of the most mechanical; and the compositions show claptrap and pose plastique of the most wooden type. The "Venus Chiding Cupid", with natural wings pinned clumsily on the garments of the child doing duty as the god of love, and attitudes which suggest anatomical specimens set up with pins - a "Ceres", an unhappy sitter fastened against a wall, with a frame of living plants around the head, reminding one more of Lazarus coming out of a leafy sepulchre - are wretched as art and poor as photography. The absurdity of making ideal subjects out of *materiel* which admit no more use of any artistic faculty than the arrangement of a child's doll-houses or rockwork for an artificial cascade, does not seem ever to have appeared to the photographer of these unfortunate works. To expend serious criticism on them is waste of words.

But it would be unfair to suggest that all of the reviews of her work were either antagonistic or unabashedly ambiguous. In fact, often the very same magazines which chastised her most severely, also occasionally offered the most fulsome praise. One can only presume that different reviewers of various exhibitions begged to differ from their colleagues. For example, the same magazine that had called her portraits "altogether repulsive" was calling them "admirable works, full of artistic feeling and refinement" (15) less than 6 months earlier. But by and large it is fair to state that if the English photographic establishment was generally hostile at worst, and lukewarm at best, the lay press and her artist friends were unanimously enthusiastic. The Intellectual Observer offered an article on "Photography as a Fine Art" in which Julia Margaret Cameron was singled out for special attention with the remark that she had

established a connecting link far stronger than any which previously existed between photography and fine arts...some of her most recent works have been the most remarkable, and have called forth from artists of the highest eminence a very enthusiastic, and, as we think, richly-deserved praise. (16)

In the interest of fairness it must also be added that by 1879, the year of Mrs. Cameron's death, even the photographic press were much more sympathetic to her work, and by the 1890s they were positively gushing in their praise, largely because soft-focus effects had become *de rigeur* with Salon pictorialists. Never again would the photographs of Mrs. Cameron want for admirers and promoters.

It is a common misconception to assume that Mrs. Cameron was a naive, blundering amateur, whose inability to produce a technically good negative or print miraculously led to happy accidents on which her reputation was based. She is seen as a dotty old lady who sloppily churned out pictures with simple-minded enthusiasm and gay abandon. Even if partially true, this verbal portrait would not be one of a committed artist, and no matter how charming and historically relevant her images she could not be taken seriously as a master photographer. Perhaps such an impression of the lady has arisen because her undoubted eccentricities provide "good copy", as they say in the newsroom. But Mrs. Cameron was a far more serious, conscientious, knowledgeable, pragmatic and single-minded artist than is generally supposed. It is true that in the first few months of experimenting with the wet-plate process she encountered innumerable technical difficulties, as one would expect, and it is true that her negatives and prints were never as technically accomplished as those by many of her (naturalistic) contemporaries. But one only has to read her own comments, and those of her friends and acquaintances, to understand that this indefatigable, energetic person could certainly have produced technically irreproachable prints if she had put her mind to it, and if it had suited her purpose. She was in constant correspondence with Sir John Herschel, and there was no one better qualified to give chemical and technical advice. If technical proficiency had been a prime goal, she could have achieved it without too much difficulty. In arrangement and composition of her figure studies she had the advice and encouragement of some of the greatest painters of the day, including G. F. Watts and W. M. Rossetti and Holman Hunt. For photographic advice she turned to David Wilkie Wynfield, a painter-turned-photographer. In another letter to Herschel, she wrote:

I have had one lesson from the great Amateur Photographer Mr. Wynfield and I consult him (in correspondence) whenever I am in difficulty. (17)

Later, in a letter to W. M. Rossetti she remarked: "To my feelings about his (Wynfield's) beautiful photography I owed *all* my attempts and indeed consequently all my success." (18) The connection in styles between Wynfield and Cameron was not overlooked by the photographic press. The Photographic Journal wrote:

Mrs. Cameron sends some studies of heads, produced by the adoption of Mr. Wynfield's method, which are very good...her artistic knowledge is inferior to that which is the chief



characteristic of those produced by her master. (19)

The British Journal of Photography was less complimentary:

As evidence of the possession and the use of eyes being two distinct things, we may advance the general agreement of the outside critics in their admiration of the blurred and distorted out-of-focus photographs exhibited by a lady signing herself "Julia Cameron", and the painfully misty, wool-like images in which Mr. Wynfield has recently indulged. (20)

Her photographs may not have been to the taste of the photographic establishment but they were not produced with ignorance or ease. For her 1874 edition of Tennyson's Idylls of the King, which contained only 12 prints she:

spent three months of unceasing care upon the preparation of this volume of photographs, and at what cost they have attained their excellence may be inferred from the fact that, in order to produce even so small a collection, she has had to take quite 200 studies. For one scene alone ("Parting between Lancelot and Guinevere") - she took 42! (21)

She herself commented on the hard work involved in such energetic involvement with the medium: "I find myself suffer in health but I hope it is rather from the unremitting labor and *quantity* of work done which I can remedy than for the quality and nature of the work which I can't remedy." (22) These are not the words of a casual dilettante. She pursued photography with a "singular ardour of enthusiasm," calling the "divine art of Photography" her "purpose in life." She displayed dynamic energy, an iron will, and a sharply focused passion for the medium that raises her in spirit a thousand feet above the mundane, earthbound conventionalities of her peers. Her avowed intent was to "revolutionise photography." Her aspirations were that people "should come to her as an artist who did not belong to the ordinary rank and file. (23)

The conclusion is clear. Julia Margaret Cameron's motive was to produce art, in the sense that her own value judgments should be expressed through the depiction of people and situations that were of crucial importance in her own life. In an age of naturalistic other-directedness, Mrs. Cameron was one of the few true inner-directed artists. Although single prints have been lauded as masterpieces it is in the body of her work as a whole that her true transcendent spirit is revealed. Individual images may be extracted as reminders of the whole, but it is in quantity that her true greatness is seen in its full power. Some critics have seen fit to differentiate between her portraits (which they praise) and her theatrical setups (which they deplore). This is to totally miss the point. Both are an integral part of a complete whole, expressing an individual's sense of self and the age in which she lived with a singular vision. They are not 'different', but indivisible expressions of a harmonious whole; each is less complete when seen alone.

Again, in order to appreciate this fact it is necessary to understand the artistic sensibilities of the age and how they were epitomized in the 'Freshwater set'. The upper-classes of Victorian England, particularly those with cultural aspirations (which comprised the majority), surrounded their leisure moments with social pursuits that might seem anachronisms today, but which were part and parcel of not only their age's expectations but also fulfilled their own needs. The biographies of eminent Victorians, and the novels of the age, are full of descriptions of such activities, which included cultural conversations over sherry, the writing of romantic verse, the playing of games such as charades, letter-writing and journal keeping, the production of minor novels and reminiscences of acquaintances and travels around England and Europe, and the writing and production of amateur theatricals.

The Freshwater set was typical of such a cultural clique. Stories abound about the activities surrounding the Camerons and Tennysons. Many of their visitors felt impelled to relate anecdotes

(often of doubtful authenticity) about even the most trivial of occurrences. One of the most interesting and reliable is Lord Tennyson and His Friends (24) by Mrs. Ritchie, formerly Anne Thackeray, eldest daughter of the novelist. This publication included reproduced photographs by Mrs. Cameron and by her youngest son, Henry, who became a well-known professional photographer. But Mrs. Ritchie's most interesting picture of Freshwater life is contained in her short novel From an Island, published in 1877, two years after the Camerons had returned to Ceylon. One of the characters in the novel is Hexham, a photographer whose activities, it seems certain, were based largely on Mrs. Ritchie's observations of Julia at Freshwater. Again, another frequent visitor to Freshwater was Virginia Woolf, Mrs. Cameron's great-niece. In a (slightly?) fictional manuscript (25), titled Freshwater, Woolf quotes Mrs. Cameron: "All my sisters were beautiful, but I had genius (touching her forehead). They were the brides of men, but I am the bride of Art," which sounds like something Julia would say in reality.

Mrs. Cameron herself often produced amateur theatrical evenings for her friends and guests. In fact, a little theater was specially built in the grounds where the youth would act for the adults. One playbill that survives announces an evening of amateur theatricals "at Mrs. Cameron's Thatched House" and the program included a "Serio-comic drama of 'Helping Hands' - to be followed by the laughable farce 'The Area Belle'." Henry, her youngest son and later to become a photographer, had leading roles in both productions.

In fact, it is difficult to differentiate between art and life, theatricals and reality, in these accounts of Freshwater activities. In Mrs. Cameron particularly the boundaries between an individual and her or his 'character' often blurred. In Freshwater she encounters her husband with a maid and exclaims: "What a picture! What composition! Truth sipping at the fount of inspiration! The soul taking flight from the body!"

Mrs. Cameron not only seems to have spent most of her time looking for models but hiring servants and gardeners solely on the basis of their looks, as possible sitters for her photographs. As one visitor insisted: "The cook is always being photographed" and to Mrs. Cameron dinner could wait, as it often did. Many of her models were villagers who were bribed and cajoled into sitting for her pictures. This was not always a flattering demand or prospect. One visitor to Freshwater was accosted by Mrs. Cameron and asked "would you like to come and see my photographs?" The stranger continued her account of the consequences: "Naturally I was only too pleased, but when she inquired whether I would mind sitting for her for an ideal portrait of Zenobia, I felt rather alarmed. I secretly objected to be taken in a masculine character, and it was only after much persuasion that Mrs. Cameron succeeded in overcoming my objections. But oh! the sitting, what a terrible ordeal it was." And what follows is perhaps the best description of a Julia Margaret Cameron photographic session:

The studio, I remember, was very untidy and very uncomfortable. Mrs. Cameron put a crown on my head and posed me as the heroic queen. This was somewhat tedious, but not half so bad as the exposure. Mrs. Cameron warned me before it commenced that it would take a long time, adding, with a sort of half groan, that it was the sole difficulty she had to contend with in working with large plates. The difficulties of development she did not seem to trouble about. The exposure began. A minute went over and I felt as if I must scream; another minute, and the sensation was as if my eyes were coming out of my head; a third, and the back of my neck appeared to be afflicted with palsy; a fourth, and the crown, which was too large began to slip down my forehead; a fifth - but here I utterly broke down, for Mr. Cameron, who was very aged, and had unconquerable fits of hilarity which always came in the wrong places, began to laugh audibly, and this was too much for my self-possession, and I was obliged to join the dear old gentleman. When Mrs. Cameron, with the assistance of 'Mary' - the beautiful girl who figures in so many pictures, and notably in the picture called the 'Madonna' - bore off the gigantic dark slide with the remark that she was afraid I had moved, I was obliged to tell her I was sure I had.

This first picture was nothing but a series of 'wobblings' and so was the second; the third was more successful, though the torture of standing for nearly ten minutes without a headrest was something indescribable. I have a copy of that picture now. The face and crown have not more than six outlines, and if it was Mrs. Cameron's intention to represent Zenobia in the last stage of misery and desperation, I think she succeeded. (26)

Another writer remarked that "Mrs. Cameron is making endless Madonnas and May Queens and Foolish Virgins and Wise Virgins and I know not what besides. It really is wonderful how she puts her spirit into people."

This is very revealing. Mrs. Cameron was constantly, indefatigably putting "her spirit into people", and that spirit was a quest for ideal beauty, as she often affirmed. Since the ideal did not exist as Miss Higgins-the-washerwomen, she was not only transformed photographically but actually *seen* by Mrs. Cameron as a mythical or biblical personage.

These remarks will serve to indicate that Mrs. Cameron's theatrical images were no different *in intent* to those that depict the physiognomies of the famous. Julia Margaret Cameron pursued her heroes in both the flesh and in the recreation of mythical or historical personages. Fiction and fact were part of the daily life at Freshwater, and this too was a creation of Mrs. Cameron's mind and purpose. She created her own ambiance from which emerged the body of her work; both are an intrinsic, cohesive expression of her life-attitude. It is not only pointless but also destructive to separate these facets of her work - they belong to the same motive, spirit and photographic intent. It is only from our own historical stance, viewing these images from a more pragmatic, deterministic age, that the costume pieces seem 'different' from the portraits and less powerful. In order to understand Cameron's body of work we have to wipe clean our minds of this generation's clinical regard for facts and naturalistic data, and transport ourselves into the pre-Raphaelite age, into the home life of the social elite and their interest in pre-Raphaelite romance, into the Freshwater set and the influence of Tennyson, into the heart and mind of Mrs. Cameron. At this point the issue is clear: a portrait of Henry Taylor as 'Henry Taylor' or as 'Kind David' are expressions of exactly the same spirit.

In conclusion it is necessary to make a specific response to the question: how great was Julia Margaret Cameron, as photographer and artist? Even a definition of the word 'great' would require a volume to itself. All that can be attempted in the remaining words is a personal response based on subjective demands from a work of art. Although it sounds simplistic it is a nonetheless an important requirement in every great artist that he/she has a sense of his/her own greatness. This surety of self-worth is an essential prerequisite for attainment in any field, including photography. Unfortunately, too many photographers, then and now, are defeated (before they begin to achieve by a spirit of old-style existentialism or nihilism. They may falsely justify it as modesty, but in reality it is all too often an unconscious awareness of their own 'ordinariness'. Mrs. Cameron had no such compunction about lauding her own value; she was very much aware of her own greatness and had no false modesty in proclaiming it. Many were the times that she referred to her own 'genius' and the 'great' photographs which would "ennoble photography and...secure for it the character and uses of High Art." In this sense Mrs. Cameron *was* great because she said that she was, and believed it. The richest meanings from a work of art depend upon full understanding of its origins, including the biography and beliefs of the artist and the *zeitgeist* of the age in which the work was produced. If the work of art cannot survive such understanding, then it cannot be truly great art.

And this, it seems to me, is the ultimate validity of photographic history. The more we know of the photographer's biography and the social, cultural, political and personal pressures that shaped the person's life-attitude, the closer we are to an accurate assessment of his/her greatness. The current fad for the individual to hide ideals and aspirations behind the work (and I am being generous here; I am assuming that the individual does have ideals) is self-evidently a phony stance. The great

photographer must be a great person in some sense, since the images are expressions of a life-attitude; the photographs have a direct link with what he/she is as a human being. It could be argued that the greatness is only apparent during the creative act but that seems unlikely since then 'making art' would be a separate function, merely an applied skill. On the other hand, we do not expect a photographer to be a great artist when filling in income tax forms. There is only one answer that seems to transcend this dichotomy. Greatness is a life-attitude that is affirmative, when 'life' is defined as the spiritual side of nature rather than everyday activities. It then becomes clear what Beethoven meant when he claimed: "He who understands my music will not be tormented by the ordinary difficulties of life". And there is the key for us, as viewers, to unlock the secrets of a photographer's greatness. We can legitimately ask - no, demand - that a study of a photographer's work will lift us up to new heights of awareness until the trivia of everyday life fall into insignificance. The artist will give us the bird's-eye view of the world, instead of reinforcing our everydayness through a worm's-eye view. That, surely, is the litmus-test of art (or any other activity, from a casual conversation with a person, to an hour by the pool-side): do I feel more energized, awake, aware, or do I feel more drained, lethargic or depressed? Great photography charges the spiritual batteries; nihilistic photography earths the mind until spiritual power is drained.

Based on this criteria, Mrs. Cameron is seen as a great photographer. She left us ample documents in the form of letters, reminiscences by her relatives, guests and friends, in her biographical notes, of her own life-attitudes. And there is no way to escape the fact that they all affirm both a spiritual quest that transcended the mundane, the banal and the petty, and that reached towards an affirmation of all things. This quest charged her life with meaning and powered her with energy. There was nothing second-rate about Julia Margaret Cameron. She was a great photographer because she had a spiritual greatness that permeated the whole of her life.

As Colin Ford has pointed out, the 19th century person believed in heroes and they produced heroes to match their belief. Mrs. Cameron's fiercest ambition was to pay homage to these heroes, and she could do so because she herself had the heroic spirit. There are many reasons for her continued popularity within the medium: not the least of which is the commercial one. The constant publication of her work has led to her 'high visibility' as a 19th century practitioner, which has led to sales of her prints, which has led to an increased demand for more images and details of her life, which has led to an increased value of her photographs, which has led...and so on. Her eccentricity is the stuff of intriguing essays and biographies; her association with the prominent statesmen, poets, painters and scientists of the Victorian age has given her a reputation by association. It is ironic that, for once, the commercial market is right in the value placed on her images, if for the wrong reasons.

Julia Margaret Cameron is a great photographer because she was an authentic hero. She expressed her own humanistic life attitude in a direct, potent manner, in an individualistic spirit that disregarded the accepted stylistic conventions of her age. With commitment, charged willpower, and raw energy, she attacked life through the camera, and did not wait passively for a picture. There have been too few photographers of her stature throughout the medium's history; she still has a great deal to teach us all.

To the majority of critics who have written or discussed Mrs. Cameron's work to date, this fact of her greatness compared to other photographers has been enough. But eventually, the critics must ask: how do the great photographers compare to other great artists in other media? If the answer must be a reluctant admittance that the medium of photography has not yet produced its Beethovens, Blakes or Bernard Shaws, then we can ask 'why not'? Why has not photography produced works of profundity to match the greatest music, poetry, painting or literature? Perhaps photography is too young - less than 150 years in a nanosecond in the day of man's history and evolution - to have yet found its fullest potential as a creative medium. Perhaps the medium itself is incapable of dealing with the deepest issues, the largest questions, the most profound ideas. Rooted strongly in the earth of reality, perhaps it is too difficult to haul it loose from naturalism into the

highest expression of the heroic spirit. Perhaps the photographers themselves have been unwilling or unable to deal with ideals in any penetrating sense of the word. Perhaps...But while photographers such as Mrs. Cameron exist within the medium there is cause for optimism.

In summary, Julia Margaret Cameron had the prime requirements demanded of a great artist. She had an overflowing sense of her own worth (as George Bernard Shaw makes one of his characters say: "our interest in the world is the overflow of our interest in ourselves"); she had a tenacity and will that could concentrate or channel this energy towards a long-term goal; she saw the objectification of her internal ideals in the form of her Freshwater circle of friends and acquaintances; she found the ideal medium, photography, for the reflection of these concerns. The question must then be asked: does the possession of these attributes inevitably lead to greatness? The answer must be a reluctant No: but without them there is no hope for achievement. These attributes would have been enough for Cameron's own satisfaction and fulfillment; she could have found personal transcendency through such private manifestations of her spiritual growth. But there is no guarantee that personal transcendency will be communicable. For us, as viewers, to recognize her merit, and for her images to span time and awake in us the same high ideals, takes a special kind of greatness, even the more mysterious for being uncontrolled. In her pictures, we sense rather than see the residue of her greatness. We believe. And such faith is not transmitted by the picture's content, or by a photographic style, or by any physical characteristics of her images. Her greatness does not reside in the appearance of her prints. What is left is the mystery of greatness. Nevertheless it is still (evidently there) even though it does not reside in any physical fact to which we can point. It is not possible to continue probing for answers to the problem of greatness forever. Sooner or later the analytical process runs head-on into flat statements of an apparently dogmatic sort. We are asking of our methods (photographs - the intuitive process - language) answers that this process cannot give. Yet no one is surprised at what turns out to be a clear case of 'good' and 'bad'. To use the words of William H. Gass, these deductions are "transparent, not inexplicable. The explanatory factor is always more inscrutable than the event it explains." (27) Julia Margaret Cameron is a great photographer. That is transparent. The reasons are, perhaps, inscrutable.

While viewing a Cameron photograph, J. B. Priestley wrote:

And all these facts and fancies, unrecognised at the time and only to be discovered and disengaged by analysis, came furiously crowding into the mind as our eyes meet this photograph; and because there is such a stir of them, then delight follows at once. Yes, even a photograph can do it. (28)

I began this essay with a perverse desire to attack the cozy, bland and trite adulation surrounding Julia Margaret Cameron. Yet the more I examined her work in an analytical manner, researched her life and the spirit of her age, my need to criticize tempered to grudging respect and then was transformed into unconditional admiration. I had bought the market hype of her greatness, was angry at my 'consumer' conformity, but discovered anew that Mrs. Cameron was indeed a great photographer - because she wholeheartedly espoused, powerfully expressed and is, even today, able to arouse in contemplative minds an "intensity consciousness" that is rare, and sorely needed.

#### Footnotes and references:

1. "Images, Obscurity and Interpretation," Henry Holmes Smith, Aperture, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1957, p. 138.
2. Quoted by Colin Ford in The Cameron Collection, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1975, p. 9.
3. Later Mrs. Cameron wrote to Herschel: "I remember gratefully that the very first information I ever had of Photography in its Infant Life...was from you in a letter received from you in Calcutta." Letter dated 26 February 1864, now in the Library of the Royal Society of London.
4. On 6 January 1839, the Paris newspaper Gazette de France announced that "M. Daguerre has

discovered a method to fix the images which are represented at the back of the camera obscura." The newspaper hailed this event as "an important discovery." The next day Francois Arago gave details of the discovery to the Academie des Sciences.

5. Annals of My Glass House was written in 1874 but not published until after Mrs. Cameron's death. It finally saw the light of print in April 1889, in a catalogue for an exhibition of her photographs, organized by her son, Henry Herschel Hay Cameron. The original manuscript (20 pages) is now in the collection of The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain.

6. Both words are unsatisfactory due to connotations borrowed from other associations, but they will suffice, once defined for this specific context.

7. 31 December 1864. Julia Margaret Cameron had been making photographs for only one year.

8. Letter to Sir. John Herschel. Quoted by Helmut Gernsheim, The History of Photography, London, 1933, p. 238.

9. Introduction to Sun Artists No. 5, 1890.

10. The Photographic News, 15 July 1864, p. 340.

11. The Photographic News, 20 March 1868, p. 134.

12. The Photographic News, 18 November 1870, editorial.

13. The British Journal of Photography, 22 September 1876, p. 453

14. The Photographic Journal, 16 October 1865, editorial.

15. The Photographic News, 18 October 1867, p. 503.

16. Quoted in The Photographic News, 24 August 1866, pp. 398-399.

17. Letter dated 26 February 1864. Library of the Royal Society of London.

18. Letter dated 23 January 1866. Gernsheim Collection, University of Texas.

19. August 1864.

20. Reference omitted from photocopy.

21. Morning Post, 11 January 1875,

22. Annals of My Glass House.

23. The Photographic News, 1 January 1886, p. 3

24. Published by T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1893

25. Library of the University of Sussex.

26. "Reminiscence of Mrs. Cameron", by a Lady Amateur, The Photographic News,

27. Fiction and the Figures of Life, William H. Gass. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1970. pp. 230-231.

28. Delight, J. B. Priestley. William Heinemann, London, 1951. p. 49.

*Written for an anthology which was not published (?), 1978.*