

# Photography and the Nineteenth Century

3 Five years after the announcement of the 'invention' of photography, Henry Fox Talbot issued (in instalments) one of the most momentous photographic publications ever. *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-6) has been called a 'classic'. Its significance lies not so much in the fact that it is the first book to contain photographic images (twenty-four pasted-in calotypes), nor even that it was mass-produced (Talbot's Reading 'factory' produced some 2,475 prints), but that it both predicted and set the terms of reference for the way photography was to be viewed for much of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

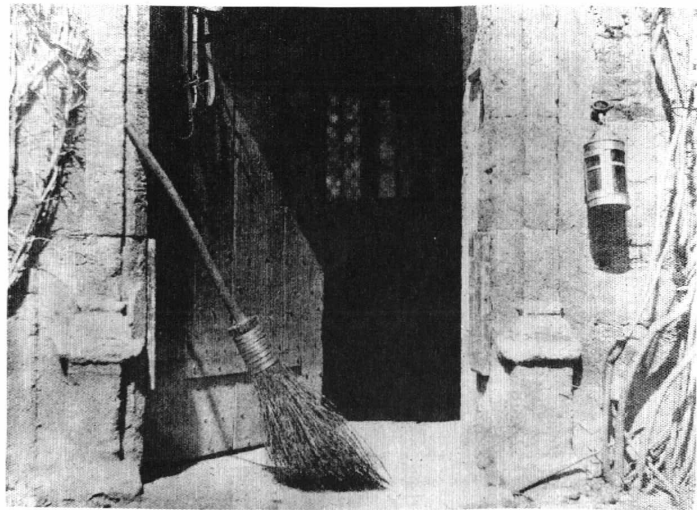
And yet although in the text Talbot is concerned to give an account of the way he developed his photographic technique, he does so very much in terms of painting. Indeed, one of the primary points of reference throughout the nineteenth century is the extent to which photography continues to be understood in relation to painting. Thus we read that the 'new art of photogenic drawing' is achieved 'without any aid whatsoever from the artist's pencil'. Photography is, by implication, an 'art' and is judged accordingly. The camera will, thus, 'make a picture of whatever it sees'. The very title of the book, *The Pencil of Nature*, underlines the analogy with drawing. The word 'art' appears continually throughout the text, underscoring the extent to which Talbot understands the photograph in terms of painting.

Despite the insistence on the literal and the minute the emphasis is on the aesthetics of beauty. (Talbot's term 'Calotype' was derived from the Greek *kallos*, 'beauty'.) The description of its literal and aesthetic qualities underscores its status. Indeed, the implied combination of aims is reflected further in the hierarchy of subjects that Talbot declared as appropriate for the photographer. Thus, cultural 'types' such as sculpture, architecture, landscapes, and 'facsimiles' (portraits) were set alongside both natural and man-made 'objects': insects, plants, lace, cotton, and 'microscopia'. Again there is a mix of the traditional fine arts with the scientific; one half associating the photograph with the academy and the *beau idéal* as propounded by Sir Joshua Reynolds in *The Discourses*, and the other relating it to the newer concern with detailed observation: a literal rendering of the thing seen dependent upon its accurate recording by the eye. In

**William Henry Fox Talbot**

*Open Door*, 1843

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Talbot's own work there is a similar tension: images of specific objects, bonnets, books, bottles, a breakfast table, all vie for attention with such formal compositional pieces as *The Open Door*, *The Haystack*, and *The Ladder*.

*The Open Door* (1843) [13], for example, is one of the book's set pieces and (as has been argued) approaches the status of a painting.<sup>2</sup> Talbot wrote of it, 'we have sufficient authority in the Dutch school of art for taking as subjects of representation scenes of daily and familiar occurrence. A painter's eye will often be arrested when ordinary people see nothing remarkable.' He justifies the choice of subject in relation to painterly tradition. Even here the 'painter's eye' is sought out for approbation, a synecdoche for the photographer's sense of both choice and composition. Certainly the sense of composition is crucial: *The Open Door* is not a candid or passing shot. It is as calculated and as composed as any painting, with a clear reference back to seventeenth-century Dutch art, as much as to a higher connotative vocabulary which unites its composition. A highly formal structure binds together a series of carefully chosen symbolic elements: the open door, the broom, the lamp. As we 'read' it, the formal geometry of light and pattern binds the symbolic references of the foregrounded objects, so that a series of symbolic and narrative levels emerges which moves it beyond the simple delineation of literal or found objects.<sup>3</sup>

Consistently in Talbot's work there is a tension between the denotative and the connotative, as if things are justified as photographs only in so far as they relate to painting. It both suggests a dialectic between denotation and connotation, between realism and idealism, so to speak, and, of more significance, between those who can read the photograph, and those who cannot. And certainly within the British

nineteenth-century tradition Talbot's approach underpins one of the central tensions in coming to terms with the 'new art'. It calls to us how much, from its inception, the meaning of the photograph has been encoded within the language and values of academic art. Even most of its basic genres, the portrait, the landscape, still life, and so on, develop from a painterly basis and establish many of their own terms of reference through their painterly equivalents.

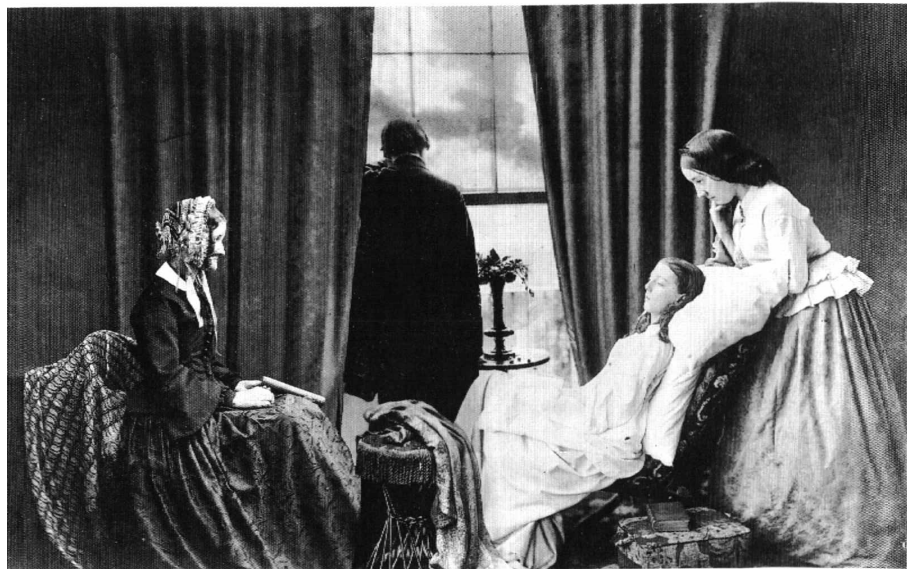
In 1861 C. Jabez Hughes (writing on 'art' photography) distinguished between three main levels of the photograph: *Mechanical photography* consisted of those photographs 'which aim at a simple representation of the objects to which the camera is pointed . . .' In these, everything is to be depicted exactly as it is. This is called 'literal photography'. As distinct from such basic recording there is *Art-photography*, where the photographer (as artist) 'determines to diffuse his mind into [objects] by arranging, modifying, or otherwise disposing them, so that they may appear in a more appropriate or beautiful manner'. And thirdly, *high-art photography* consists of 'certain pictures which aim at a higher purpose than the majority of art-photographs, and whose purpose is not merely to amuse but to instruct, purify, and ennoble'. Here, then, are three distinct categories, a hierarchy as closed as Reynolds's, with a status dependent on a meaning and assumed effect characteristic of nineteenth-century British culture.<sup>4</sup> For the Victorian, such high-art photography was to be found in the work of Henry Peach Robinson (1830–1901) and Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813–75). Both developed what were known as *composite photographs*, a process based on combination printing which used a series of negatives to construct the photographic image proper. The photographs are distinguished by their false appearance, for they are made up out of separate scenes and demand for much of their effect

**14 Oscar Gustave Rejlander**

*The Two Ways of Life, 1857*

A photograph which apes the 'grand style' of painting. This is a definitive combination print which, in its heavily plotted moral symbolism, reads like a Victorian narrative painting.





Henry Peach Robinson

*Fading Away*, 1858

Robinson's image reflects Victorian penchant for sentimental and melodramatic. Its significance lies in the issues it raised about the real and the faked. As a documentary image (posedly) it looks forward to current debates about documentary photography and advertising. Of course, a fake scene, at the time caused a scandal.

a high degree of the theatrical and the parodic. Their significance is twofold, first, as aligning the photograph with Victorian narrative painting, and secondly, as stressing the moral context of the image. Two of the most famous, Rejlander's *The Two Ways of Life* (1857) [14] and Robinson's *Fading Away* (1858) [15], remain distinctive period pieces. To the modern eye they seem peculiarly dated and moralistic. *Fading Away* caused a furore when it was first published because it was assumed to be an actual (*sic*) photograph of an actual (*sic*) scene. It is a telling irony that it was acceptable to the public only as a fabrication, not as a literal image. The subject was accepted as part of Victorian conventions; but a photographic intrusion into private family space was not. *The Two Ways of Life* is based on a series of obvious oppositions between the moral and the immoral. On the right are images of thrift and industry; on the left images of the profligate and degenerate. Its size, and the scope of its moral tale, equate it with the grand style in painting, and its period quality borrows directly from earlier painterly tradition and iconography. Both pictures are staged with the purpose of telling a visual story. Like Talbot's images, they depend upon a known visual language and convention, as found in the work of contemporary painters like Millais and Holman Hunt. They are, as much as Talbot's work, examples of the photograph as a painting.

The other extreme in the period is that 'mechanical' photography looked down upon by Jabez. In this area we find significant differences in the approaches of photographers working in the three main nineteenth-century photographic traditions: British, French, and

American. The work of Roger Fenton (1819-69), for example, is central to any understanding of the nineteenth century<sup>5</sup>. He produced images in all the (then) accepted forms: landscapes, cityscapes, still lifes, and portraits, and as much as Talbot, he views the world according to a strict hierarchy of values, very much associated with the landed upper classes he photographed. His images do not question cultural assumptions, but rather they reinforce them in a way that eighteenth-century painting did for its wealthy patrons. They are painterly to a high degree. Even the famous Crimean War images ignore the brutality of war, instead creating set pieces of an army at leisure and bound by the strict codes of behaviour and hierarchy of nineteenth-century England. There is no democratic or questioning frame of reference in Fenton. His quintessential image of the 'valley of death' with the ground strewn with cannonballs, is an empty scene, as if the reality of what had happened could not be photographed. We see the same selective eye at work in his landscapes, and even when he photographs London it is the central London of Westminster and Hyde Park that he chooses: a highly selective imagery which celebrates public buildings and monuments as symbols of power and order. The sprawling and chaotic London of Charles Dickens and such photographers as John Thompson is absent.

This selectivity is nowhere more obvious than in Fenton's photographs of still-life objects. The photographing of objects is of the essence to early photography, such mechanical recording supposedly reproducing the actual without intervention from the photographer. What we looked upon was 'real'. There was, though, a clear distinction between still life and objects. A still life, like the portrait, was to be understood through terms of reference drawn from painting. The imaging of objects for their own sake, though, is part of an unstructured probing of the external world. The camera is an eye which seeks out things, rather than a frame of reference which reads things according to a predetermined hierarchy of significance.

This attitude is part of a larger cultural and scientific revolution, and develops differently within the three traditions I have noted. It is clearly of significance, for example, that the 'founder' of sociology, Auguste Comte, developed his ideas in the same period as Daguerre. The drive to collect and classify the world of objects and structures, developed through the work of such figures as Buffon, Lamarck, and Cuvier, is reflected in such images as Daguerre's famous *Shells and Fossils* [16] of 1839, suggestive of an entire tradition and placing photographs in the context of this larger process of classification. It reflects both the developing museum culture, and the way in which the photograph was seen as an analogue of the real. The objects in such photographs display a fierce insistence on their own authenticity, much as things do in a museum cabinet. We look at them not because of any



Louis-Jacques-Mandé  
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ells and Fossils, 1839  
image which reflects  
in the museum culture  
the nineteenth century  
the urge to classify  
and collect. The act of  
photography is suggested  
as a parallel process.

secondary meaning they might have, but as *objets trouvés*. A similar condition is achieved in the work of another pioneer of French photography, Hippolyte Bayard (1801–87) who, amongst other subjects, photographed garden implements as things in themselves, underscoring a continuing empiricism as a basic aspect of the French tradition. (See, for example, *The Overturned Pot* or *The Hat*.) Phenomenologically, there is a primary concern with the thingness of things, whereas even when Talbot photographed shelves of books [17], it was as a library, with all that implies about his own position, his academic knowledge, and the cultural traditions within which he worked and wished his images to be read.

Like Talbot, and in contrast to the French tradition, Fenton's still lifes are painterly in their formal, compositional qualities. Nor does he choose to depict everyday or common objects: falling into two groups, his subjects are either dead game or fruit [18]. While Fenton's photographs are wonderfully alert to texture and light, with a remarkable play of surface detail, it is the subjects themselves that are distinctive, for they reflect wealth and privilege to a high degree: the bounty from the landed estate, the walled garden, and the Victorian greenhouse. The luxurious and exotic nature of the images are as much a celebration of the country house as are Fenton's landscape and London images. Compare this with Calvert Jones's *Garden Implements*

(1847?) [19]: here the implements are not only displayed in terms of their functions—they seem to speak to the very world of labour which produced the fruit for Fenton's images in the first place.

Debates over the relationship between the photographic image and its painterly equivalents continued throughout the century. Naturalism, it was felt, was to be avoided. An article by Lady Elizabeth Eastlake in the *Quarterly Review* in 1857 announced that 'fifteen years ago . . . specimens of a new and mysterious art were first exhibited to our wondering gaze', since when, 'photography has become a household word and a household want'. She went on to say, though, that the more precise the photographic image was, the less would bits 'aesthetic significance'. What was wanted was a *general image*, to suggest the effect, not the thing itself. In 1853 Sir William Newton, speaking to the Photographic Society, had argued against 'minute detail' and favoured a 'broad and general effect'. Thus, 'the object is better obtained by the whole subject being a little out of focus . . .' The effect would be 'more suggestive of the true character of nature', and would be found to be 'more artistically beautiful'. It is an argument that hovers between the language of Talbot and that of the later pictorialists, suggesting once again elements of the Reynoldsian *beauty ideal*, and arguing for a general nature against the very specific language of detail that the image could produce.<sup>6</sup>

Much nineteenth-century photographic practice, then, was conducted within the language of painting and academic notions of beauty. Indeed, in relation to the work of Julia Margaret Cameron (see Chapter 6), the relationship is extended to literature, for in her association with Alfred Lord Tennyson the attempt to suggest a general effect and ideal beauty is given qualities associated with poetry.

#### 17 William Henry Fox Talbot

The Library, 1845

This image is similar to Talbot's image of Victorian bonnets in a shop window and confirms the nineteenth century's obsession with *things*. However, it also confirms the context within which Talbot photographed, for this is his library and reflects the literary context through which he read his world.





**Roger Fenton**  
 Still life, 1860

Victorian image which has parallels with painting. It is a photographic 'still-life' that looks towards the later studio studies of shells, fruit, and vegetables by such photographers as Edward Weston. Fenton's image has a remarkable tangible quality, but it equally reflects the highly privileged life-style to whom such exotica were available.

As Tennyson wrote in his poem 'On a Portrait', the painter had to seek 'rare harmonies' in order to achieve the 'mystery of beauty'. In that sense, many Victorians were as much painters as they were photographers.

Other developments, however, raised different questions. The nineteenth century also saw the establishment of a major tradition of travel photography. This was the great age of European empire, and in the work of such photographers as Francis Frith (1822–98), John Thomson (1837–1921), Samuel Bourne (1834–1912), Maxime Du Camp (1822–94), John Murry, and Félice Beato (active 1860s–1890s) we can see foreign (non-European) cultures viewed through western eyes and western assumptions. One could add the name of Herbert G. Ponting (1870–1935), who published photographs taken on visits to Japan, India, and Antarctica. Books such as Frith's *Visits to the Middle East* underscored the interest in and demand for scenes 'foreign'. In these images the photographer is 'cultural interpreter and witness to the world', but only because his assumptions place him at the centre of the geographies through which he moves. Many of these images have a valuable ethnographic and anthropological significance, imaging in



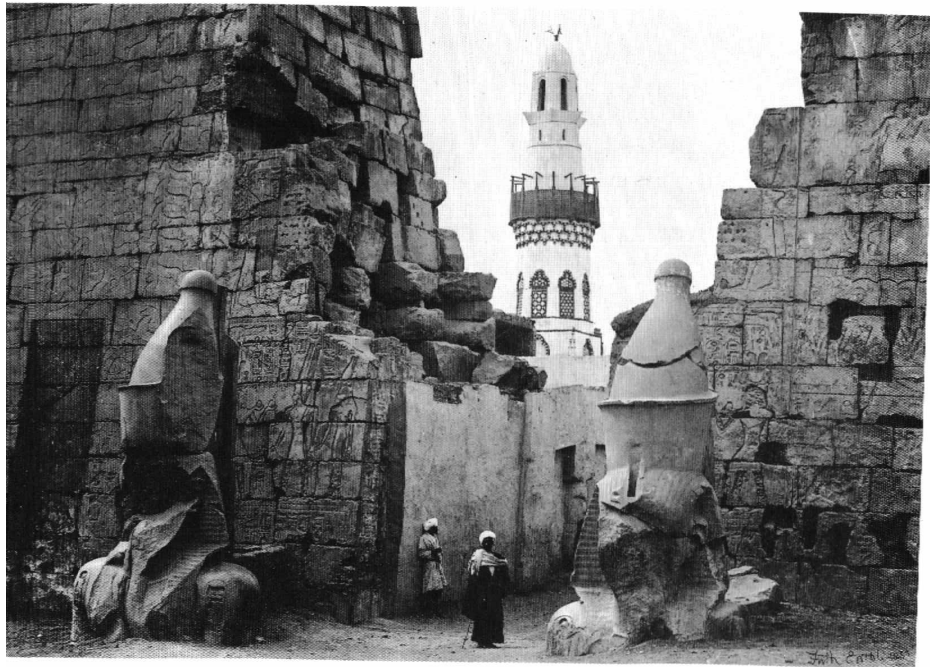
detail the artefacts and values of other cultures and civilizations, and in the process making the world they photograph part of a museum culture. In a period when many western archaeologists were physically carrying away the artefacts of the cultures they viewed, photographers were able to 'capture' entire monuments as a way of possessing that world for European eyes. Francis Frith's *Entrance to the Great Temple, Luxor* (1857) [20] is characteristic of the period, focusing on a significant building from the position of an outsider, placing the scene and its figures in a picturesque frame of reference. These lands exist, as it were, for the benefit of the western camera. In a period of limited travel and communication, photographs offered wondrous images of otherwise only imagined cultures. They point to the international terms of reference that a visual culture beginning to establish itself would offer; and the basis of that new culture would be the photograph.

**19 Calvert Richard Jones**

Garden Implements, 1847?

Jones's image might be compared to Talbot's *The Open Door* as well as to images by Hippolyte Bayard. Unlike Talbot, however, Jones has 'arranged' rather than structured the implements so that they retain their literal meaning.





#### Francis Frith

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or, 1857

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In other contexts the camera started to concentrate on specific, even limited, locales in order to image acute analyses of the life lived in them. Such is the work of Lady Clementina Hawarden (1822–65). An amateur photographer, she made her central subject the depiction of women in closed and constricted privileged environments. Although to some extent influenced by the Pre-Raphaelites, there is in her work a highly charged analytical approach to her subjects which avoids documentary and edges towards portraiture. It is the individual self that is so significant. The long dresses almost imprison their wearers, and the interior spaces are more like cells than domestic rooms. Figures are isolated, alone, or are looking and being looked at—as if there is a continuing presence of surveillance. The effect is not unlike the inner turmoil of Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, (1853) who struggles against social restriction and the limitations placed on women's lives. *Clementina Maude* (1863–4) [21] is exemplary Hawarden. The mirror sets up the terms of inner reflection as well as the woman's image as a surface reflection and social construct. The figure on the bed is photographed as herself, with a suggestion of inner distress intensified by the way the window, the door, and the mirror all exhibit a restrictive and overpowering presence. Such an image might be contrasted with Camille Silvy's (1834–1910) full-length portraits of the great and the good in the same period. A French aristocrat, and a producer of the then-popular *cartes-de-visite*, Silvy was a renowned

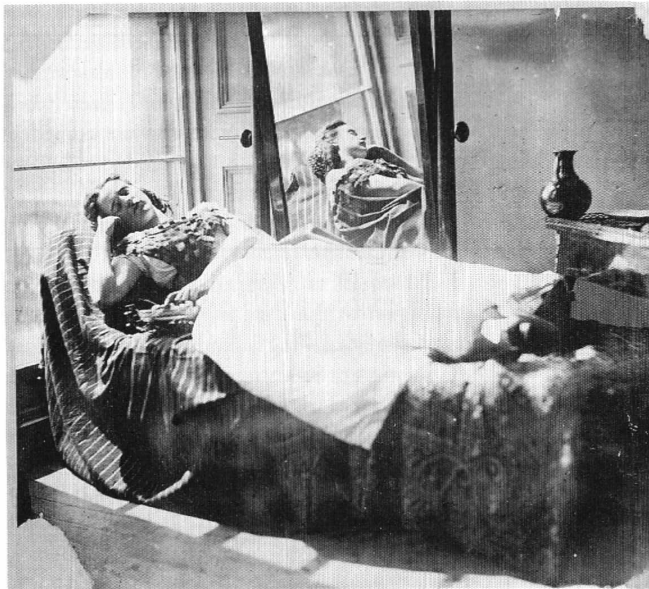
portraitist. But he effectively renders back a surface figure clothe the symbols of power and privilege. There is no critical dist between himself and the subject, such as Hawarden achieves. Like *carte-de-visite*, these are images which advertise a public self, n private condition. Along with Anna Atkins (1799–1871), the ‘ woman photographer, Julia Cameron, and Anne Brigman, Hawa constitutes part of a powerful and central female tradition withir period.

Hawarden responded to a cultural condition, but another ce: figure in the period responded both to the condition of photogr and his chosen subject-matter. Peter Henry Emerson (1856–1 was a central figure in what is understood as ‘pictorialism’. He nounced Robinson as ‘the quintessence of literary fallacies art anachronisms’. The statement is characteristic of his appr Emerson sought a new understanding of the photograph, based c own terms of reference and its own possibilities as a medium. He discounted the continuing comparison with and dependency upo painting as the primary point of reference. He was, of co influenced by painting, but his tradition is that of Constable, C and the Barbizon School: those painters dedicated to a literal, rea rendering of the thing seen rather than to a carrying on of rec convention. He (mistakenly) argued for a photography based o science of sight and renounced comparisons with painting, insi instead on the possibilities of the photograph itself as an art in its right, with its own distinctive features. In Emerson’s approach d

### 21 Lady Hawarden

Clementina Maude, 1863–4

An image wh ch suggests the closed and restrictive environment of the Victorian woman. Although ostensibly portraits, Hawarden’s photographs reflect a psychological condit on similar to that expressed in the writing of the period, most notably by the Brontës and George Eliot.





P. H. EMERSON

**Peter Henry Emerson**

his painting *Water Lilies*, 1886, a representative image from Emerson's extensive and detailed study of life on the Norfolk Broads in the nineteenth century. The photographs have about the same pervasive melancholy that suggests the passing way of life.

light, and the formal composition of the scene are central, but it was the *seen* rather than the scene that remained crucial. The potential for a photograph lay in what was before the camera. This was pictorialism at its most pure, and we can understand why it was Emerson who awarded Stieglitz first prize in a photographic competition in the 1880s. He argued against retouching,<sup>7</sup> soft focus, and combination printing, just as he rejected photographs with an allegorical or narrative structure. His aims are reflected in his use of the platinotype (and photogravure), for these were considered more permanent and delicate in their ability to reproduce tonal variation, and palpable in terms of the atmosphere they suggested.

Emerson was individual in a number of ways, but his essential concern was to photograph a particular area. Just as Thomas Hardy had focused on Wessex as his imaginary geography, through acute attention to the detailed depiction of a specific area, so Emerson's record of East Anglia and the Norfolk Broads constitutes one of the most sustained photographic studies of a single area and community in the history of the photograph. The depiction of everyday life from the point of view of an outsider is both acute and detailed. His *Life and Landscape on the Norfolk Broads* (1886) and *Naturalistic Photography* (1889) reflect his underlying philosophy which, although he was to reject it shortly afterwards, nevertheless remains central to the development of the medium. In image after image Emerson achieves a remarkable degree of presence [22]. Everything within the frame of the

image is, seemingly, given equal attention—a 'democratic' approach, quite distinct from what we find in Fenton, for example. Indeed one of the extraordinary things about Emerson's images is their modernity. Emerson has stripped the image of its associations with painting. In his photographs we receive an image of a specific community as it was. Where Fenton might have referred it to another context, so Emerson claims them for his own camera. Yet these are not literal, much less documentary images. They have, in their own way, a poetic resonance, such is the acute attention to the individual terms of reference. In brief, they look at what they see, and do so in terms of what is there rather than what is assumed to be there. They bring a needful humility to both the scene and the seen.

The strength of this whole period, however, is astonishing. The portraits of Hill and Adam (see Chapter 6), the detailed accounting of the area of Whitby (in Yorkshire) by Frank Meadow Sutcliffe (1853–1941), and the extraordinary architectural studies of Fredrick Evans (1853–1943) or the work of George Davison, whose *The Vision Field, Mersea Island, Essex* (1890), made with a pinhole camera, underscores his involvement with the Linked Ring, all point to the variety of the age. Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson, 1832–5) is another significant photographer (as well as the author of *Alice in Wonderland*), although his images of children have raised questions regarding his depiction of the body; Sutcliffe's images are detailed excursions into a particular environment, almost Atget on a small scale. They offer an acute record of place in the most understated of ways. Likewise Evans, whose forte was architecture, especially cathedrals and (French) châteaux. A member of the Linked Ring, Evans wanted a 'pure' photography which, like Emerson, sought an image based on the possibilities of the medium itself. His interior images stress surface and texture as much as light and space—an environment of constant change and subtle delineations. They long to the photograph as a fine-art tradition.

The century gave very much a mixed response to the question of what the photograph means. Indeed, Lady Eastlake's essay remains appropriate as an estimation of the whole period. It announces the photograph as belonging to 'a kind of republic' in the way it unites the tradesman and 'the nobleman' in a single enterprise; it also stresses the immediacy of the medium. Thus, to photograph 'is to give evidence to facts'. This is its unique role, but in turn, this is also the very ambiguity that is to be carried forward into its status as a medium of the twentieth century. The modern photograph as such, drags its nineteenth-century past into every image.