

## R. D. Wood: Two book reviews 1995–7

[First a book review by R. D. Wood, 'Windows of Light: A Bibliography'. published in July 1995 issue of the *ESHPH Newsletter*, p.12. (This *Newsletter* edited by Roy Green, administrator of the European Society for the History of Photography, at that period was produced about twice yearly without any volume or issue number) ]

*Windows of Light: A Bibliography of the Serials Literature Within the Gernsheim & Photography Collections of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center*, by Roy Flukinger. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center: Austin 1994. 411 pp. Softcover, US\$30.00 plus \$5.00 overseas shipping at surface rate, payable by international money order or VISA/Master Cards from HRHRC, P.O. Drawer 7219, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas 78713–7219. ISBN 0–87959–132–3.

This catalogue of periodicals relating to Photography held at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center has two sections, the major part being 330 pages devoted to 'Photography Retrospective Serials Holdings' and a lesser 39 page section listing the 'Current Photography Serials Holdings' presently being received by the Center. Around thirty people were involved in the cataloguing of this collection, the authorship of this production being given as Roy Flukinger (Curator of Photography) by reason of him contributing a very readable introductory essay (pp.7–35). He discusses not only the richness, diversity and scholarly value of periodical literature but the simple pleasure that can be gained: 'historians and other scholars...enjoy delving into the volumes and issue of these primary sources. Yes, they find answers to their questions and, if they are doing their job well, more and better questions based upon these answers. But, beyond the grand theories and philosophical ideas they truly enjoy meeting the people who put these words and images on paper throughout these years...they were the seekers and the workers, the experimenters and the dreamers, the critics and the gossips, who brought photography to its present state of influence and acceptance in our modern world'.

The short title of this catalogue, 'Windows of Light: A Bibliography' is obviously derived from Flukinger's own characterisation (p.11) of Periodicals. Yet it is not a very helpful title to have in prominent large letters on the 2.6 cm thick spine of the book. As more befits the essential utilitarian nature of such a catalogue, a tool for researchers and scholars, would it really have been wrong to have chosen, say, a plain and informative 'Photography: Serials at the Ransom Center'? Indeed a great deal of effort has been given to make this an attractive production for what might have been a mere tool: it has sixty-nine illustrations of pleasant and choice items from the pages of some of the listed holdings at the Ransom Centre. Yet the success of the illustrations in making this catalogue easy on the eye is for the reviewer spoilt by the layout of the bibliographic entries. Bold or italic type is not used to highlight the title listings which are in alphabetic order by title. Every entry repeats its data base field names in capital letters such as 'TITLE:' in front of every periodical title, and 'CALL NUMBER:', 'HOLDINGS:', preceding the other lines of each entry. When scanning

the pages of these listings the eye is therefore not, as it should be, caught easily by the actual alphabetized title of the periodical but rather by repetitions of 'TITLE:'.

The oldest readers of this notice who have an interest in the history of photography may find it sad that the Ransom center seem to have a gap of twenty years in their holding of the RPS *Photographic Journal* (without even microfilm copies) for the period 1954 to 1973. Arthur Gill (1915–1987), began his regular column 'One Hundred Years Ago' in September 1958 producing about 150 items until December 1971. He then immediately started another bi-monthly series on the basic history of photography under a running title of 'Call back yesterday'. Throughout much of the period he (and others) also wrote excellent substantial articles on specific themes of early photographic history. It is unfortunate that *The Photographic Journal* of the 1960s and early 1970s (when it happened to go through three different formats) was a period comparatively rich in writings on the history of the subject but should be issues that happen to be unavailable to readers and researchers in Texas.

RD WOOD.

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Another book review, which follows, was written by R. D. Wood in 1997 intended (without the last paragraph) for the *ESHPh Newsletter*, but remained unpublished:

*Records of the Dawn of Photography. Talbot's Notebooks P & Q*,  
edited, introduced and annotated by Larry J. Schaaf

CUP in cooperation with the National Museum of Photography, 1996, 25 x 25cm, xxxiii, 413 pp. ISBN 0-521-44051-3.

In the actual manuscript notebooks Talbot wrote on the recto right hand pages only, leaving the opposite left hand even numbered pages blank, except on some very few occasions when he wished later to add some extra comment. However, in this book published by CUP, facsimiles of the complete Notebook P (6 Feb 1839 to 25 June 1840) and Notebook Q ((26 June 1840 to 23 April 1843) are printed on the left-hand (verso) pages with a transcription and footnotes by Schaaf on the opposite right-hand (recto) pages. If the transcript had been placed on the left (verso) page with the facsimile of the manuscript pages of the notebook correctly on the right, the feel of the original manuscript would have been achieved and indeed the published book would have been easier to navigate. This expensive book is thus spoilt in an unnecessary and arbitrary way. For a book costing £90 this is not merely disappointing, but outrageous. To make matter worse the inside margins are narrow and tight, even though outside margins are wide. The result with a book of this weight is that for ease of reading a finger has to be tightly held down onto the open page to ensure that it is flat. This is especially a necessity when reading in artificial light as otherwise a band of light is reflected down the text on the page parallel to the spine. Has a fad of a designer or of the printer produced this result? An uncomfortable experience should not be offered to any reader who has paid out £90. Could it be that the book was paginated differently to the plan originally intended? For if the right hand pages had been intended to be on the left hand, and vice versa, without changing the margins, then both of the aspects discussed above would have been satisfactory. What else do the publishers and printers deserve except a booby prize?

Even so this production resulted in the editor and annotator, Larry Schaaf, being awarded the £10,000 Kraszna–Krausz Award for the best book published on the history of photography in 1997. Was that justified? Were the committee who made that decision not reflecting towards the idea of producing important documents in facsimile rather than judging the achievement of this particular work? Even if the editorial commentary were entirely pedestrian, and the book production no better than outlined above, then perhaps it would not matter greatly to ‘collectors and fetishists of photographic rarities’. (I am grateful for this phrase to A. Molinero who used it in a different context in the *ESHPH Newsletter*, Autumn 1996, p. 11). Maybe they did not notice the organisation and formatting of the pages mentioned above, for perhaps those problems only become obvious when one tries to study the text closely. Of course facsimile reproduction of historic documents is important to the scholar for genuine reasons. It helps, for example, in judging if the document was written entirely as a day–by–day diary or if there are signs of it being all, or in part, a fair hand later reconstruction. Without a fuller discussion of such issues this production is a disappointment. Otherwise what was the point of the facsimile reproduction? The high price will still keep the study of Talbot’s notebooks within a limited circle in contrast to a wider dissemination if the production had been a very much cheaper annotated transcript of the text with perhaps two or three plates of facsimile reproduction of the most significant pages of Talbot’s notebooks. On hearing about this worthy project of the reproducing the notebooks, this reviewer had been looking forward to seeing the resulting product. Indeed he would very much like publishers to produce more facsimiles of important documents, it would be an important resource to allow a greater number of people to have available original sources. In this way there could be more informed discussion, more verification from the original sources, and maybe more pressure on the writers to be more than journalists endlessly repeating moribund and historiographically derived concepts and supposed facts of the history of photography.

Sadly, this book does not represent the dawn of that new era. Who made the decision to spend funds on this lavish project? — would it have been accepted (and been a flawed production?) if it had been proposed from outside the establishment base? I think not. If you think differently then try for publication of an equally worthy project at half the cost and report back when you are accepted.

RDW [unpublished review 1997]