
Copies of Studies in Photography can be obtained from the Scottish Society for the History of Photography; details can be found on the Society’s website: http://www.sshop.org.uk/.

http://repository.nms.ac.uk/157/

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Book review for SSHoP


James Good Tunny is remembered – if at all - for his walk-on appearance in histories of Scottish photography as the young man who watched the pioneers D.O. Hill and Robert Adamson at work, aching to be introduced:

Time after time have I gone and stood on the projecting rock below Playfair’s monument on Calton Hill, and drawn inspiration from viewing Mr Adamson placing a large square box upon a stand, covering his head with a focusing-cloth, introducing the slide, counting the seconds by his watch, putting the cap on the lens, and retiring to what we know to be the dark room. Oh! If only I could have got an introduction to these men, it would have been the consummation of my happiness!

But otherwise, he appears to have made little impression, until now. Julian Bukits has painstakingly reconstructed from a variety of sources the life and times of a reasonably prominent member of the professional Edinburgh photographic community, and has managed to uncover more than the bare bones of his private and public personas.

The son of an Irish immigrant handloom weaver, Tunny was born in Edinburgh in 1820. He became a shoemaker, a profession renowned for its radicalism at this period (a contemporary saying has it: ‘let the cobbler stick to his last and let the learned men write books’). It appears that he did not take up photography

professionally until some time in 1851, and although a little can be gleaned from his ‘Early Reminiscences of Photography’, given to the Edinburgh Photographic Society in 1869, much of how Tunny mastered the early forms of photography remains opaque. Tunny mentions the names that might be expected: Hill and Adamson, ‘the late Mr Howie’, ‘my old friend Thomas Davidson’, and ‘Messrs Ross and Thomson, of this city’. In this lecture, subsequently published by the British Journal of Photography, Tunny managed to enrage contemporaries about his understanding of the priority of two inventions: the wet collodion method and the process of photography on porcelain. Julian Bukits has combed the photographic literature for every mention of Tunny’s professional career, and now we have – for the ‘father of Edinburgh photographers’ – more than just this facet of his life. Along the way Mr Bukits has located and identified a number of Tunny’s images, with which the book is liberally illustrated (for purists, it should be noted that the paper on which the book is printed does not provide the best basis for their reproduction; however, it is important that they are represented here).

The biography is divided into three main sections: firstly, Tunny’s personal life is sketched out, with meticulous referencing from genealogical sources. This is important, as it provides the background for the photographic narrative which follows.
Mr Bukits has addressed the knotty problem of how a shoemaker could manage to amass the capital to set himself up in business as a photographer, and demonstrates that Tunny was able to put his savings into property, which then provided an extra income stream in the form of rents. His family life appears to have been busy, and was probably extremely noisy: he married, successively, three wives, and fathered a total of eleven children, six of whom (including all four sons) predeceased him. Mr Bukits is worried about the number of wives, but Tunny was not alone in his uxoriousness. Mungo Ponton (1801-80), another Edinburgh photographic pioneer, also married three times, with a total of eight children; and – plucking an example from another profession, and a slightly earlier date - Thomas Smith (1752-1815), founder of the dynasty of Stevenson lighthouse engineers, was thrice married, his third wife Jean (nee Lillie, formerly Stevenson, then Hogg, subsequently Smith) also having been married twice before. But Mr Bukits points out that the delay in notifying the authorities about the deaths of the successive Mrs Tunnys perhaps looks bad, as does his own cause of death, which was from syphilis.

The second section covers Tunny’s photographic career, and is the largest portion of the biography. This looks at his various studios, goes on to look at his involvement with various local photographic societies, their annual exhibitions and his assorted writings. For the readership of Studies this is where the most interesting meat of the book will be found: how Tunny clearly was a contentious figure, managing to put up the backs of other photographers over various issues. It leads fairly logically into the third part, sketching out Tunny’s career in radical politics, which perhaps indicates where the more abrasive side of his character may have developed. There is an interesting conclusion, where Mr Bukits asks some of the questions which plainly have been irritating him while he wrote his biography, many of which remain unanswered. In particular, why, asks Mr Bukits, has Tunny all but faded from history, when he was plainly a fairly prosperous and significant figure in Edinburgh in the circles in which he moved while he was alive? The author points to quarrels with Thomas Rodger of St Andrews and William McCraw of Edinburgh, but reckons that the person most likely to have benefited from the eradication of his memory was his most distinguished employee, American-born James C.H. Balmain (1853-1937), who bought Tunny’s business after his death in 1887. In turn, Balmain’s large stock of photographs, including nearly forty years’ worth of Tunny’s work, was eventually incorporated into the Yerbury archive. A brief epilogue explains what happened to Tunny’s surviving daughters (not all good news, I’m afraid), and this is followed by a useful section of Appendices which cover various publications, including the full text of ‘Early Reminiscences of Photography’, as well as Tunny’s account of one of his trips to the United States.

This is a painstaking and meticulous account of a curious figure – he is best known for his photography, yet it was only while this book was being researched that a major body of the subject’s work was unearthed (at the Royal Scottish Academy). Overshadowed by the work of the objects of his wistful yearning (‘Oh! If only I could have got an introduction to these men, it would have been the consummation of my happiness!’), thanks to Julian Bukits we now know more about James Good Tunny, much of it unexpected, than we could have expected could possibly have been there to be uncovered. Who will now undertake such biographical work for others of a similar standing - ‘the late Mr Howie’, ‘my old friend Thomas Davidson’, and ‘Messrs Ross
and Thomson, of this city”? By doing so, a radically different and more complex history of photography in Scotland may yet emerge.

A.D. Morrison-Low
National Museums Scotland

1. Detail of ivory plaque on the studio camera used in Tunny’s Clerk Street premises.