

Nineteenth-century photographs, twentieth-century books

BY CHARLES DESMARAIS

Kinsey, Photographer: A Half Century of Negatives by Darius and Tabitha May Kinsey

Produced by Dave Bohn and Rodolfo Petscheck
Scrimshaw Press/320 pp./\$150.00 (hb)

The Light of Other Days: Irish Life at the Turn of the Century in the Photographs of Robert French

by Kieran Hickey

David R. Godine/172 pp./\$22.50 (hb)

Seneca Ray Stoddard: Versatile Camera-Artist

by Maitland C. De Sormo

Adirondack Yesteryears/190 pp./\$10.50 (hb)

Victorian Cameraman: Francis Frith's Views of Rural England 1850-1898

by Bill Jay

David and Charles (London)/112 pp./£3.25 (hb)

The West: An American Experience

Edited by David R. Phillips

A & W Visual Library/232 pp./\$7.95 (sb)

The books which will be considered here are similar in that they all attempt to provide a context within which to consider particular "photographic views" from approximately the first century of the process. They differ, however, in the emphasis given to the three main aspects of the pictures and the circumstances surrounding their existence: the photographs themselves,

Frith, whose early work in the Middle East is widely known, published photographic tourist views and postcards until his death in 1898. Author Bill Jay concentrates exclusively on Frith's English work, providing a unique and engrossing portrait of the country in the 1800s. Though Jay makes no attempt to date the pictures, he seems to emphasize the work of the last, postcard, period.

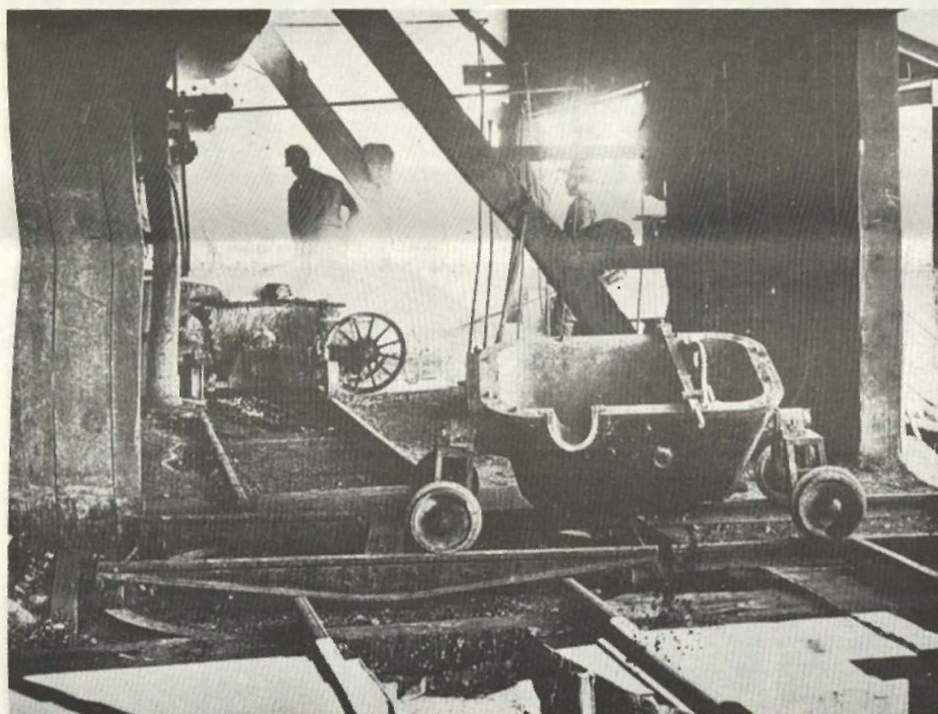
Jay credits Frith himself with all the photographs made by his company, devoting a paragraph to the creation of a shaky case for such attribution. The photographs are "stamped with his style and authority," and are therefore his pictures, we are told. But stylistic anomalies in the main body of the book are later explained away as "not typical of Frith's work and... probably due to the influence of a contemporary...."

This is in direct opposition to the attitude taken by Kieran Hickey toward William Lawrence and Robert French. Though he does not provide documentation, Hickey tells us that French made all the views of Ireland done for Lawrence's company after about 1880. The author points out the effect Lawrence's suggestions and demands must have had on his employees' subjects and working methods, but insists that French ultimately provided the creative force.

As history, **The West** is especially interesting for its reliance upon photographs as primary source material. Throughout the book, the pictures are illustrated by captions and short pieces of text. Editor David R. Phillips is rare among the producers of such books in the importance he places upon the 10 identified photogra-

quality reproductions, and more and larger pages — though line for line of text and image for image there is probably about the same amount of information in each book. Oh, and two full color reproductions: one of a Kinsey photo hand-colored by his wife, the other of their marriage certificate.) Both are attempts at comprehensive biography (sometimes to the point of irrelevancy) which are somewhat short on historical method but long on interesting anecdotes. More important, where the other authors maintain a certain level of objectivity in their discussion and evaluation of their subjects, Bohn and De Sormo prove totally incapable of critically examining theirs. The praise and admiration is unbounded, nor is it marred by any attempt to look for sources or to judge the work within the context of other work made in response to similar commercial considerations. De Sormo obviously knows little about photography or photographic history; photographer/teacher Bohn shouldn't be able to use even this excuse. But both Bohn and De Sormo own large collections of work by Kinsey and Stoddard (Bohn with co-contributor Rodolfo Petscheck) and this might affect their estimation of the work somewhat.

As different ambitions (or pretensions) as these five books certainly are, taken as a group they force us to consider questions which threaten the stability of the flimsy construction we call photographic history. The basic problem was pointed out last year in an **Afterimage** article by Marie Czach ("Notes on Practical Criticism," October, 1974), which emphasized the unavailability of pictures by, or information on, the thousands of



Joseph E. Smith, **Billings Smelter, Socorro, 1880.** From **The West: An American Experience.**



Seneca Ray Stoddard, **Lake Tear of the Clouds.** From **Seneca Ray Stoddard: Versatile Camera-Artist**

the artist who made them, and the events depicted.

Seneca Ray Stoddard: A Versatile Camera-Artist, for instance, is a biography which only secondarily presents the man's pictures, first as keys to the general history of the Adirondack region of New York, and finally as unique entities. To the editor of **The West: An American Experience**, the photographs are mainly tools for historical research. Some short biographies of earlier photographers are included, but these are sketchy. While there is some attempt to understand and deal with the pictures in this book as "works of art," for now let us say only that the design and reproduction methods are the exact antithesis of those used in **Kinsey, Photographer**, which is presented as an art book/biography which happens to have social historical interest. The Frith and French books are composed of more or less equal parts picture, pictured, and picture maker.

These last two books, **The Light of Other Days** and **Victorian Cameraman**, actually are alike in a number of ways, not the least of which is that they were both produced in Britain and concern essentially British photographers. In fact, Francis Frith and William Lawrence (Robert French's employer) were quite possibly in direct competition for sales of photographic postcards of Ireland in the 1880s and '90s. (Both companies even had their cards printed in the same German state of Saxony.) **Other Days** is larger in format than its counterpart, and the reproductions are somewhat finer, but the same formula is used in both books: a concise biography and background first, followed by the pictures, each accompanied by a long caption meant to explain its historical, biographical, or artistic significance.

phers whose work comprises the substance of the volume. Though the verbal sketch of Seneca Ray Stoddard consists solely of sentences lifted, without acknowledgement, from **Versatile Camera-Artist**; and though Phillips provides biographies for two photographers whose work is not even shown, but omits them for four whose pictures are included, the main text, the captions, and the pictures do work together to provide insight into the place of the artists within the milieu they recorded.

Darius Kinsey is the latest photographer included here (though he began about 1890, he worked through the 1930s and died in 1945), yet his work is truly of the nineteenth century both in feeling and subject matter. After years as a studio portraitist, he and his wife Tabitha began a business in which Kinsey would make portraits and views in and around Washington logging camps, send the negatives to Tabitha who would process and print them and mail him the prints, which he would then sell to the loggers, typically at 50 cents each.

Seneca Ray Stoddard catered to a different audience: the Adirondack tourists. In addition to an excellent ongoing series of stereo views (which De Sormo barely mentions) it seems that Stoddard also made larger views, published illustrated guide books and a magazine, and gave lectures illustrated with his hand-tinted lantern slides. He was also an amusing writer, a map-maker, and an inventor of sorts.

Although Scrimshaw is charging 14.3 times as much for the Darius Kinsey book as one would pay for **Stoddard**, the two books are remarkably similar in objectives and approach. (The extra \$139.50 buys a slipcase, high

early photographers who work in her state of Illinois alone. It is easy to see how this ignorance, extended in logical progression to the rest of the country and the world, would prompt her to comment that "there may have been hundreds of Atgets working and perhaps thousands of Lartigues." For if, as she reminds us, the great majority of well-known historical figures never thought of themselves as "artists" in the museum-wall sense of today, then surely there are numerous geniuses of the medium everywhere, running modest businesses or making images out of pure love for the process and for life, about whom we know nothing.

Herein lies a value and a fault of these books (and, to some extent, all attempts thus far to examine the medium's roots). The value, of course, is in providing some of that missing background on workers who had been almost completely forgotten or, as in the case of Frith, who had produced a far larger body of work than was generally known. But these "discoveries," interesting — even exciting — as they are, also serve as indications of what is yet to be uncovered. Thus it is rather ludicrous and a bit sad to see authors hawking their favorites as "one of the greatest photographers," "a great pioneer photographer," "one of the great Victorian photographers," etc. We simply do not know enough to so confidently ascribe relative worth.

An alternative interpretation of the same issue is that photography, the truly democratic medium, produced few if any nineteenth-century artistic "geniuses" at all, and that the concept of "masterworks" cannot simply be adopted from the traditional fine arts. This line of

thought has it that photographs — all photographs — are intrinsically interesting for their subjects and for the picture-making miracle itself, with all its dilemmas of time, space, veracity, and “beauty,” and that no early photographer or group of photographers held a monopoly on the miracle.

This argument is quite persuasive, especially in light of the fact that it is often technical prowess which we admire in photographers of the 1800s. (One might even include here the “fine art photographers” — Cameron, Hill, Robinson, Emerson, et al. — and argue that innovation in technique is perhaps the most important aspect of their achievements. If, however, the reader cannot go this far, perhaps he or she will at least see the validity of the point for less self-conscious workers.

Each of these books makes a special point of describing the great labor of lugging a dark tent with plates (or

photographer or photograph: subject interest. That a photographer was “the first” to photograph a particular feature — Niagara Falls, the Rocky Mountains, goldmining, the moon—is considered an indication of importance. This in spite of the fact that landscape and human activity and scientific subjects have been examined by the lens from the moment the technical barriers to such subjects were removed. A war, a fire, a famous personage—or Broadway with horse-drawn carriages—these are the “elements” of a “great” early photograph.

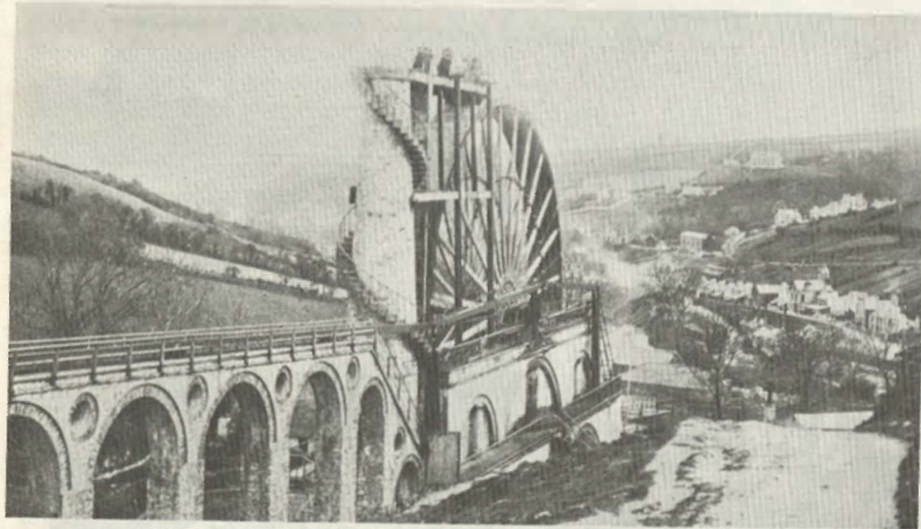
What it all comes down to is that we still, today, look for the same things in a nineteenth-century photograph that the nineteenth-century viewer valued. How absurd it is, then, for us to attribute artistic greatness (using the word “artistic” in its twentieth-century, conceptual, sense) to these workers.

The essential truth is that the commercial photogra-

function. A Kinsey catalogue quoted in the Scrimshaw book shows that he was similarly affected by early twentieth-century dictates, in his advertisement of “striking and unusual results”: “Prints from original 11x14 negatives of the big trees and logs, have in them characteristics which give one a decided impression that the trees and logs are really large.”

As with all folk art, what we must keep in perspective is that the works are more the product of the traditions than of a single mind or soul. It is because we know of so few people who were working and because even fewer pictures have surfaced (survived?) that **any** extant, usable, collection of non-portrait work by one individual would be significant.

The last important point which must be raised concerns the reproduction of historical material, and that issue as it affects these books. As I have tried to show, these photographers wanted to and usually did achieve



Top left: Francis Frith, **Laxey Wheel and Snaefell**. From **Victorian Cameraman**. Bottom left: Robert French, **Kingsbridge Railway Station, Dublin**, c. 1905. From **The Light of Other Days**. Right: Darius Kinsey, 1906. From **Kinsey, Photographer**

pounds of dry plates, or even large film holders) about the countryside. It is almost as if merely getting there and back with camera and equipment had something to do with the quality of the pictures. And it did. One can hardly imagine an unexciting 16x20 contact print from a competently made wet plate negative. (Part of the reason for this, no doubt, is the habit wet plate photographers had of scraping the emulsion from failures to reuse the glass. They also saw the processed negative before they left the scene and thus usually had the option of remaking it. But even today, photographers seem to be careful and precise in proportion to the size of the negative they use). It is largely our recognition of the high degree of craft involved which commands our appreciation.

Technical competence was, of course, expected of commercial photographers. Thus, it was their work upon which photography often bestowed its gifts of silver, gold, and egg white. The finer the tones of the print, the larger the negative used, the more apt we are to praise the photograph and its maker. Whether it be the elimination of detail in the paper negative calotype or its minute delineation in the combination of collodion and albumen, the early photograph fascinates the modern viewer. The prolific production that goes with taking pictures for money served to increase the odds that the gifts would come. Time added yet another layer, as processes of unique beauty became obsolete.

Time also played a role as sites and situations took on special significance as symbols of a past era. This brings to mind the second criterion, beyond technical quality, by which we attribute “greatness” to an early

pher was most often an untrained folk artist who chose his or her subjects and point of view according to the prescriptions of society (which the artist quickly learned by examining records of print sales). Composition, lighting, and other such formal components were usually obvious, extremely simple, and/or were well-worn conventions passed around the trade. As with the colors and precise detail of the prints, the radical changes in **seeing** wrought by photography — notably the acceptance of “mundane” subject matter and the combining and overlapping of elements in many stereo photos viewed without a stereoscope — were not innovations introduced by some master, nor were they consciously exploited or even understood by any of these workers. They were simply aspects of the industry's products which went unnoticed — or at least unquestioned.

This is not to suggest that the conventions remained static throughout the early history of the medium, but simply to say that change came about gradually and without direction — or, rather, it was directed by changes in consumer demand. This is blatantly obvious in the visual difference between Kinsey, who did most of his work after 1900, and the other photographers represented in these books. The change undergone by Kinsey, which accounts for that difference, exactly parallels the metamorphosis of the stereo view around the turn of the century from a subject orientation (in response to market demands for informational views of specific places/things) to exaggerated and spectacular stereo effects, largely for their own sake, as halftone reproduction and the hand camera took over the informational

technical competence in their trade, because it was required by consumers and simply because one had to be able to **see** the subject, which was the real reason for the picture's existence. As we look at these photographs today, however, the tones, colors, halation, detail, and surface qualities which attract us in an obsolete (and therefore rare to a degree) process have a special attraction which at times even threatens to interfere with our experience of the person, place, or thing pictured.

The three part question which is raised is whether it should be the function of today's books to fully convey the impression of the “original print;” whether the very idea (contradiction) of “original photographic print” as applied to subject-oriented pictures is just so much capitalist hype; and finally, whether the “original print” is an actual piece of silver-coated paper or an attitude and a concept which existed prior to the concrete stage of image-on-support.

While the reproductions in **The West: An American Experience** are so hard (contrasty) as to subvert even the informational value of some of the photographs, it may be that the adequate printing of the Frith, Stoddard, and French books better conveys the essence of their work than the brown ink duotones on buff paper do Kinsey's. Clearly, the dilemma is that to represent (or represent) what is in one sense the original — the vintage print — is to reproduce it in exact facsimile; but to make precious what was once easily accessible, to present in the “fine art” context of a limited edition, slickly produced book what is actually from the vernacular tradition, is to destroy its spirit.