

**Colonial Photography in Nineteenth Century Grahamstown:
An analysis of the Dr W.G Atherstone Bequest.**

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HYWELL WATERS
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DECLARATION

This Dissertation is the unaided work of the candidate. No part of this Dissertation has been or is to be submitted for a degree in any other university.

Hywell Waters
Grahamstown.
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ABSTRACT

The research for this degree comprises of a theoretical dissertation and a practical component of exhibited photographs.

The theoretical research investigates the original photographic prints and glass-plate negatives taken between the 1840's and 1890's, by the late Dr. W.G. Atherstone - an enthusiastic, Grahamstown amateur photographer.

Dr W. G Atherstone's prints and negatives were examined by the author to deduce and establish his photographic abilities, his numerous techniques, diverse subject matter and the pictorial construction of his images.

Selected works will be examined in order to interpret and illustrate his diverse interests and approaches towards photography. The selection of these photographs was determined by their pertinence to subject matter, and to the pictorial and historical considerations of the candidate.

These issues are finally examined in relation to the candidates's own approach to photography today.

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INTRODUCTION

“...before the invention of photography, reflection was the only means of exacting a facsimile of the world. Other than in mirrors or glass, or polished metal, or in sheets of still water, the capturing of a reflection remained an unattainable ideal.”¹

The *camera obscura* and *camera lucida* attempted to reach this ideal, however the truthfulness and veracity of all created images as documents were continuously subject to challenge, until the introduction of photography in 1839. Here at last was the 'proper' vehicle for producing images with the ability to create an authentic record.²

“Before photography, reality was history and history was largely an untrustworthy report of an event that occurred years ago.”³ Photography today allows us to live in “historical reality”. This visual alternative has challenged communication, based exclusively on words, in all facets of our lives.⁴ It has had an incredible influence on contemporary society, and has been involved directly or indirectly, in nearly all of our experiences; such as teaching, explaining, illustrating, entertaining, revealing, and expressing our feelings and desires.⁵ Our society has completely accepted photography as a medium of communication, even though it is considered to be one of the newest 'languages' in the world.⁶ In this communication revolution, Olu Oguibe argues that “compared to all other image-making techniques and preoccupations that we loosely refer to as the visual arts; photography has come a long way in a very short time.”⁷

Invented in 1839, the evolution of photography has been a long and arduous process.⁸ Today, the

1 Weinstein & Booth, 1977: 9.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

4 *Ibid.*, p.10.

5 Kemp, 1977: 16.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

7 Oguibe, 1995:1.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

portable camera that George Eastman built in 1888 to take roll film, has developed and advanced into inexpensive, and hence accessible models. The ever-burgeoning business enjoyed by photo-processing laboratories and drugstore counters around the world, shows that our attachment to the photograph has not waned since the publication in 1840 of the witty lithograph by Theodore Murrisset, *La Daguerrotypomanie*. This captured the photographic craze that gripped Parisian society, and predicted many of the developments that have since taken place in photographic history.⁹

These developments in photography were not the invention of a single person or moment. They arrived at the end of a long series of discoveries by a line of chemists and thinkers.¹⁰ All of them showed the intuition that light could leave a permanent imprint on a flat surface that has been spread with some combination of chemical substances. Their discoveries culminated in the work of Daguerre and Talbot. Their discoveries ensured the growth of this new invention in the European context, which later through colonialism, spread to Southern Africa.

This research intends to explore photography in South Africa, through the analysis of Dr. W.G. Atherstone's photographic record of nineteenth century Grahamstown and its environs. Through a discussion of his streetscapes, architectural studies, landscapes, portraits and recreational photographs, one can gain a clearer and deeper insight into the life of a dynamic and prominent man who took a keen interest in photography, even though he was an amateur. Furthermore, his works provide invaluable documentation of the period and region in which he lived.

In order to develop a technical, critical analysis of Atherstone's photography, it is imperative for the photographs to be contextualised in their epoch. Despite my attention to particular images and my attempts to identify main themes of Grahamstown through Atherstone's work, it is difficult to select 'typical' photographs which characterise Grahamstown. Indeed, to do this may undermine the variety and complexity of Dr. Atherstone's work and of Grahamstown history itself. In the following chapters I have focused on his photographic images and practices, however it is important to remember that they

⁹ Oguibe, 1995: 231.

¹⁰ Cacayo & Russel, 1995: 16.

were not produced in isolation. They were used in interaction with his travel, writings, drawings and ideas. It is the narrative component of his photographs and their relations to his manuscripts, both visual and verbal, which determines their meanings.¹¹

The photographs do not represent merely captured moments whose individual meanings are frozen in time, to be unlocked by the correct analytical tools. Rather, they represent dynamic objects with tangled histories whose surfaces reflect different meanings within different historical and cultural settings. This is especially true in the case of colonial photography, because the empire and its signs have continuously been transformed.¹² Similarly,

“...even a single photograph can provoke multi-layered insights into the life of an individual and the ethos of the age. The fascination of 'family' photography, provides a powerful point for wider investigations on how everyday narratives are shaped by currents of culture, history and ideology.”¹³

Chapter One of this dissertation will comprise of an overview of how photography was introduced to South Africa and in particular Grahamstown through colonisation. It is hoped that this chapter will provide the historical background for the following chapters.

Chapter Two will entail a brief review of Atherstone's life in which his varied and diverse interests and experiences influenced his photography. His techniques will also be examined, as they greatly influenced what he could photograph.

Chapter Three consists of a discussion of the subject matter and pictorial constructions used by Atherstone. This will be subdivided into various subject categories to allow for greater clarity, identification and recognition.

Chapter Four comprises of a discussion of my approach to photography, in terms of subject matter, use of lighting, position of camera, composition and techniques.

¹¹ Ryan., 1997: 225.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 225.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

CHAPTER ONE

“Today Africa is no longer on the fringes of the known world. Its civilisations are changing, new currents are stimulating the soul. Its people are struggling to become part of the world without losing the lasting values of their cultural heritage. Political and economic colonization put an end to the age-old isolation of the continent; it opened Africa to the world and the world to Africa.”¹⁴

The advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century coincided with a rapid expansion of colonisation that was to culminate in the "scramble for Africa". This enabled the documentation of the increasing European incursion into Africa's politics, economy, religion, and culture. In so doing, it transmitted to the outside world, its first view of the “immense and indecipherable African continent.”¹⁵

Photography arrived in Africa on 16 November 1839 - the same year that Daguerre announced his invention in France. Horale Vernet made the first image in Egypt in 1839 and his pictures soon appeared in Europe. Photography and the camera became a permanent part of European campaigns of exploration in Africa .

The discoveries and efforts of the explorers, the transformation of people and the immense territories under the yoke of laws and governments, could now be documented in precise and reproducible images. “This view of Africa transmitted by photography was not impartial; it was above all a Western interpretation, particularly rich in fantastic ideas”¹⁶ and shrouded in ‘modernity’.

Modernity as Wells explains, refers

"to a complex set of developments relating to industrial change. This includes the increasing concentration of people in towns and cities; geographical mobility

¹⁴ Monti, 1987: 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

consequent upon the invention of the steamengine and the spread of railway networks, and an economic faith in technological progress."¹⁷

Technical developments in photography grew out of this new faith in technology, and were initiated by Louis Jacques Mande Daguerre who announced his newly invented photographic process to the world. This was in Paris at a meeting held under the auspices of the *Academie des Beaux Artes* in the *Institut de France*.¹⁸ Two South Africans, namely Dr W.G. Atherstone and F.W. Barber, were present at this meeting. Atherstone originated from Grahamstown and is now well known for his achievements in medicine, science and his involvement in the identification of the first diamond in South Africa. Atherstone was also well known as a pioneer of early photography in South Africa. It is highly probable that his interest in this subject was first aroused on his visit to Paris. It is perhaps safe to assume that Atherstone and Barber, who returned home together three months after Daguerre's announcement, were the first to bring detailed information of the invention to South Africa.¹⁹ However, it was only during the early 1840's that several photographic enthusiasts brought the cumbersome apparatus to the Cape and Algoa Bay, on their way to the East.

Bull and Densfield, and Bensusan state that the first photographic establishment in the Cape, or for that matter in South Africa, was by Jules Leger in Port Elizabeth in October 1846. Bull and Densfield argue "that this comparatively late date is rather surprising in view of the photographic activity that was taking place elsewhere, for example in India, Mauritius and Australia."²⁰ However, with the help of William Jevois (a Genealogist at the Albany Museum in Grahamstown); I have established and identified evidence to suggest that this photographic establishment was not the first, instead it occurred in Cape Town at least seven months before.

In the unpublished diary of Lt. W.F.D Jevois of the Royal Engineers, it is written that on the 15 April 1846, that he called on a "Mr (Carel) Sparmann, who took Daguerreotype likenesses. Saw some

¹⁷ Wells, 1974: 31

¹⁸ George, 1981: 15.

¹⁹ Bensusan, 1966: 5.

²⁰ Bull & Densfield, 1970: 33.

backgrounds which Bell (from the Cape Observatory) had printed for him, which were beautifully done.” This suggests that his studio could well have been established for some time. Again on the 30 April 1846, Lt. W.F.D Jevois “Rode to Mr Sparmann's the daguerreotype man and sat for a likeness, which was not a good one”, so he did not take it. Later in July 1866, he "went to Mr. Sparmann's at a quarter before nine am. Had a likeness of the daguerreotype taken."²¹

It has however been established that *De Venzamelaar*, a newspaper, gave a full description of the process used by Mr. Carel Sparmann in April 1847 - a year later than the date noted by Lt. W.F.D Jevois. It has been suggested however, that perhaps Carel Sparmann was the first advertised professional daguerreotypist, although he had been practicing photography for over a year.

Grahamstown History.

In order to understand the context of these photographic developments, one needs to consider Grahamstown as a typical frontier town.

"Grahamstown arose as a fortress in an ongoing battle between two cultures: the mutual misunderstanding of nineteenth century Europe and untamed Africa. The first frontier war was between the blacks and whites began in 1779".²² In 1812 Grahamstown was established by Sir John Craddock, the governor of the Cape county, as the new military headquarters of the Eastern districts, in order to curb the growing friction with the Xhosa-speaking peoples over issues such as cattle and land. Growth in Grahamstown was initially slow due to floods and crop failures, however, with the arrival of the settlers in 1820, the town began to flourish due to increasing trade. By 1860, the military and economic importance of Grahamstown began to decline due to the gold and diamond rush; the creation of the Kei river as a new settled boundary of the Cape Colony and the creation of a new road link between Port Elizabeth and Kimberly.²³ In order to accurately evaluate Atherstone's photography, one must not ignore the importance of this context in which he worked.

²¹ Diary of Lt. W.F.D Jevois (Mr. William Jevois, Grahamstown)
²² Anonymous, 1958.

²³ O'Meara, 1995: 6.

CHAPTER 2

The enthusiastic amateur has been responsible for much of the progress and history of Southern African photography.²⁴ Two kinds of photographers were responsible for the earliest images. On the one hand, chemists, optic engineers and so forth, experimented with its scientific side. On the other hand, former painters and art students saw it as a new vehicle for expression.²⁵ Through an analysis of Atherstone's work, it is clear that he dabbled in both aspects.

Dr. William Guybon Atherstone played a significant role in photography's early progress in South Africa. The following biographical material should not be regarded as separate from the rest of the text, but is intended as additional information to enhance the full story of Dr. Atherstone's photographic 'career'.

Atherstone was born in Nottingham, England on 29 May 1814, and was five years of age when he landed in the Colony. He was educated in Uitenhage and Grahamstown, after which time he trained as a doctor. At the conclusion of his apprenticeship, he remained undecided about his future. Initially he joined a surveying team, however, when the sixth frontier war commenced he joined the forces as an assistant surgeon. After two years he was given leave to go overseas to complete his medical training. He first went to Dublin, and then took the membership of the Royal College of Partisans of England. This was followed by a few years in Europe, during which time he visited Paris.

Atherstone married his cousin, Catherine Atherstone in England in 1834. He returned to Grahamstown with his wife in July 1840. He then joined his father's private practice as a practitioner.²⁶ Atherstone was the district surgeon from 1855 to 1878, and for nearly seventy years he was closely associated with the town. He soon became a prominent pioneer surgeon and physician, and also became renowned as a geologist and paleontologist. His interests included botany, zoology, veterinary science and

²⁴ Anonymous, 1983: 9.

²⁵ Thomas, 1978: 6.

²⁶ Cough, 1976: 19.

astronomy. In addition, he was reputed to have been an accomplished artist and amateur musician.²⁷ Until his death in 1898, he pursued a course that brought him national and international acclaim. It is fortunate that Atherstone was a great diarist; he left approximately two hundred and seventeen notebooks and journals which have been evaluated by Nerina Mathie in her book, *Man of Many Facets: Dr WG Atherstone 1814-1898 Pseudo-Autobiography*. Mathie in agreement with Cough argues that Atherstone's writings and sketches illustrate "a mind full of ideas, never at rest"²⁸, governed by an insatiable curiosity.

"My experiences overseas awoke both an unquenchable thirst and an insatiable appetite for knowledge which even, as yet in 1898, has not been satisfied. It has become automatic to bring observation, reflection, deduction and learning to bear on every solitary 'thing'; encountered - be it a rock shell, mineral, fossil, plant, insect, animal, person, Bushman, Hottentot, Kaffir, medicine, science, geology, literature, national history, photography, art, music, national or local event."²⁹

Photography was one such interest which provoked his curiosity. Atherstone's photographic endeavor didn't begin in earnest until early 1850, even though he was at the Louis Daguerre's demonstration a decade before. His main body of work is derived from what is called the 'collodion' or 'wet plate' era. In other words, his work occurred in conjunction with the introduction of this process in the Cape in 1854. Atherstone's work thus experienced the common problems of a developing science.³⁰

Photography was derived from the ingenious application of science to the uses of the daily world.³¹ As Bensusan states, "In the kingdom of unending progress another frontier has fallen"³². The ability to register with mechanical exactitude and reliability, the detailed appearance of things, was no longer an unattainable ideal. "This was an astonishing addition to a Western European culture, already rich in

²⁷ Van der Riet, 1974: 6.

²⁸ Cough, 1976: 37.

²⁹ Atherstone cited in Mathie, 1998 : 44.

³⁰ George, 1981: 43.

³¹ Thomas, 1978: 6.

³² Bensusan, 1966: 6.

new technologies."³³ The series of world expositions in the second half of the nineteenth century, illustrate the power of this wave of technical self-congratulation. Photography served to unite the world under a common gaze, "A new global perspective: The world under one rock."³⁴ As a symbol of Western technology and as an instrument of its expanding world vision, the camera began to accompany expeditions which carried the Western presence into remote or unexplored territories³⁵.

The expansion of this new form of 'communication' was facilitated by increased technical virtuosity. In the era of Daguerreotype, the function of photography did not extend beyond undemanding still-lives, portraiture, landscapes (including foreign views), and the recording of public events. However, in the mid-nineteenth century its uses were broadened due to the development of negative-positive processes which could, from a single glass-plate negative, produce numerous prints for the market.³⁶

The possibilities of this new science were readily grasped by all sectors of society. Photography was used to please artistic tastes, for fashion, or simply to respond to a particular public occasion. As the opportunities increased through the nineteenth century, they became formalized and distinct to suit the standing conventions of the time. This is evident in the treatment of subject matter, in which standard poses and a standard guiding social tone are evident.³⁷

The photographer expressed the rigidities of the social vision as well as the scientific capacity of the age. Technical and physical factors imposed a discipline of procedure, which resulted in the deliberate rituals of much of nineteenth century photography. Early photographers faced problems resulting from the complicated processes necessary for sensitizing and exposing a surface to light and subsequently bringing out, or developing the light drawn images that had been formed. The handling of acids and other chemical agents used in these processes required caution, especially since the fumes from warmed

³³ Thomas, 1978: 11.

³⁴ Thomas, 1978: 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁶ Hardwick, 1861: 148.

³⁷ Thomas, 1978: 11.

mercury and from ether and alcohol solutions which were emitted in the wet plate process, were particularly hazardous to one's health.

The camera itself, the essential instrument, was, while simple in its function; "an awkward combination of bulk and delicacy" requiring a tripod for its operation and box for storage.³⁸

Hence, expanding usage must be placed against the background of continuing technical difficulty. Absoluteness of command could only be achieved within limits. Even though the camera could always be depended upon to register what was placed before it, any movement on the part of the subject resulted in a blurred image. The photographer of the 1850's thus presents an ambiguous figure - an emblem both of power and limitations. Thus, while virtually all of the possibilities of the camera were recognized in the nineteenth century, they were only partly realized.³⁹

Initially, travel and exploration photography seems to have been the focus of amateurs, namely painters, writers, and men of science such as anthropologists and geologists. Their enthusiasm, and often madness, enabled them to deal with technical difficulties and dangers similar to those faced by explorers and missionaries.⁴⁰ In the African context, these problems were exacerbated. In the diary of Thomas Baines, a settler artist, it is noted that the difficulties of procuring clean water and the intensity of the sun and dust, combined to frustrate the photographer. In general, pervasive problems included the heat and humidity; the formation of mold and dust; the bad quality of chemicals; and a lack of distilled water. Moreover, the collodion (a chemical used in the early wet-plate era) usually had to be smuggled into South Africa because steamships refused to transport it, as it was an explosive ingredient of gunpowder.⁴¹

The struggles of these photographic enthusiasts, which were often disproportionate to the results, highlights their dedication and remarkable feats. Their enthusiasm spread with the refinement of

³⁸ Thomas, 1978: 13 .

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁴⁰ Monti, 1987: 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

equipment and growing experience. Nevertheless, the success of the photograph remained unpredictable, hence it is safe to assume that far more photographs were taken to overcome the numerous problems. This explains the existence of approximately two hundred and thirty negatives and prints, taken and developed by Atherstone.

In compiling certain photographs for Atherstone's overview, the quality of the image has not been the chief criterion. Some technically poorer images have been included because of the insight they offer into the technical capacity of the early camera.

It is important to note that for economic and social reasons, photography was practiced exclusively by white people, and it was mainly whites who were photographed. Images of other races were recorded either for clinically ethnological purposes, or when they seemed interesting or picturesque to the photographer. Apart from this, their appearances in photographs reflected their secondary roles on the fringes of white society, as nursemaids, grooms and so forth.

Atherstone's collection also reflects the limitations of the early camera. Only towards the end of the nineteenth century did faster shutter speeds, hand held cameras, and popular photography, bring about a revolution in the recording of reality.⁴² In general however, mid-nineteenth century photography consisted of static studio portraits or formally dressed settlers. Instead of providing insight into the nature of everyday life, these pictures had a 'numbing' effect when viewed in large numbers. By evaluating Atherstone's portraits, it is clear that he tried to overcome this problem. He placed his portraits in their context, in other words, in 'their environment'. People, places and events form significant elements. Moreover, general street scenes and townscapes have been used to provide a socio-historical framework of the 'environment' in which he lived, namely Grahamstown.

Inevitably, in the monotone and photocopying processes used in the reproduction of Atherstone's photographs and negatives, much has been lost. His original photographs are by no means uniformly sepia, instead he made use of a variety of shades, including golden brown, reddish brown, burgundy

⁴² Schoeman, 1996: 11.

and silvery grey.

For the layout of this thesis it has been further necessary to reduce some of the images in size, resulting in an inevitable loss of both detail and general impact. Cropping of photographs has been avoided. In the majority of cases, the full and complete range of images as composed by Atherstone, has been represented. Further information on the photographs presented will be found in the accompanying captions, though it is often sparse. Existing captions originally from the Atherstone album are given in quotation marks.. In general, however, the captions express my personal opinions regarding the photographs. As Geary noted "captions imbue photographs with meaning, and are an important device for framing them."⁴³

Atherstone did not assign dates to his photographs, hence I have approximated dates by identifying clothing trends, particularly those of women. European styles were followed in South Africa, although there was an inevitable time lag, particularly inland. Men's fashions changed less rapidly, although labels, button positions and hats could be used as rough indicators of the period.⁴⁴

TECHNIQUES

In order to analyse Atherstone's various techniques and experiments, it is necessary to illustrate the processes that he preferred. One such process is the wet-collodion process. Further reading on his chemicals and combinations is recommended in Atherstone's 'pseudo-autobiography'.⁴⁵

In 1850, an Englishman called F.S. Archer invented the wet-collodion process. Collodion, a clear, viscous liquid, is a solution of pyroxyline (guncotton) in alcohol and ether. A clean glass was then coated with this solution. When dry, this plate was immersed in a silver nitrate solution. The silver nitrate reacted with the collodion to form either silver iodide or silver bromo-iodide, thereby making the glass more sensitive. The glass plate was exposed while still wet and then immediately covered with a

⁴³ Geary, 1999: 10.

⁴⁴ Schoeman, 1996: 40.

⁴⁵ Mathie, 1998: 411.

developer. The negative was then fixed in a strong solution of hypo and then washed. As a result, a number of prints could be made by contact printing from the glass negative held to the sun. This involved pressing paper to the negative while exposing them. Wet plates held sway until the 1880's when dry plates coated with gelatine silver bromide emulsion reached the market.⁴⁶

The 'wet collodion process' was introduced to South Africa in 1854. Later in 1871, gelatine was seen as a feasible emulsion on glass plates. Though the early gelatine plates were actually less sensitive than wet collodion, it was only in 1874 that an amateur put on sale a dried gelatine emulsion to be reconstituted with water by the photographer. The drying (by heat) produced a great increase in sensitivity and reduced exposure time from the six to ten seconds required by the wet-collodion process, to one twenty-fifth of a second. This ultimately made portraiture more naturalistic, thereby paving the way for the development of the snapshot. Included in Atherstone's glass negatives are numerous dry gelatine emulsions.⁴⁷

It is difficult to distinguish between negatives produced by the albumen plate, wet collodion and dry collodion process, as differences in formulation and treatment could produce varying results. The most commonly used technique is the wet-collodion process. Viewed by reflected light, a wet collodion plate has a colour ranging from dull tan to almost creamy white, but when looked through by transmitted light, it has a full range of dark tones. The coating is uneven, particularly at the edges.⁴⁸ On the other hand, dry collodion processes produce plates which are often greyish and evenly coated as they have been probably prepared with less haste than wet collodion. As a result, edges of emulsion are far neater and concise. As albumen is less soluble than collodion, albumen plates are often darker and can be differentiated by testing edge scrapings of the emulsion in acetone.⁴⁹

Atherstone's use of these processes was outlined in his numerous letters to Sir John Herschel, who was described by the Science Museum in London, as the 'father of photography' due to his great

⁴⁶ Aver, 1975: 27.

⁴⁷ Steel & Taylor, 1984: 90.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.90.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

contributions to this burgeoning science.⁵⁰ In his letters he discusses in detail his discoveries related to the making of good collodion pictures on paper, by transforming them from glass to paper. He explains how, seven and a half years before, he had tried, though unsuccessfully, to create collodion images on black paper. He then transferred them from glass but was unsuccessful until he tried the effect of expansion by heat on bodies of unequal expansive parts. This was facilitated by backing the pictures with black Japanese varnish, or any tenacious strong paper on the back; then drying it. He then explains that by dipping the whole into boiling water for five minutes or more, and then suddenly into cold water, the whole picture would separate from the glass and it come out perfectly clear.⁵¹ These unique techniques vividly illustrate Atherstone's scientific mind and its ability to develop and create scientific advancements in any field of study.

However, these scientific advancements continued to be plagued by several problems. The emulsions on these plates were unable to record all the spectral hues accurately. Tonal shifts occurred due to the emulsions' varying sensitivity to different spectral light waves⁵². In a letter dated 11 August 1867, he describes the great difficulties he had experienced while putting the developer evenly on large, eleven by nine inch plates in hot weather, because the plates were drying out too quickly. A further problem experienced by him, was his inability to photograph the moon. He attributed these problems to the fact that his camera was not going at the same rate as the moon. Hence, like other photographers of this period, Atherstone's work continued to be limited by the inability to apply European techniques and equipment to the African environment.

Most nineteenth century prints were the same size as their negatives. These prints were made by placing the negative and the sensitised paper in the closest possible physical contact in a printing frame. This is followed by exposing the frame to natural light for the time required to develop them.⁵³ Often the finished prints were fixed with gold toning; a process that imparted a distinctive warm brown colour to them. This particular process is frequently found in historical photographs, and is also a dependable aid

⁵⁰ Mathie, 1998: 45.

⁵¹ Mathie, 1998: 344.

⁵² Hardwickt, 1961: 141.

⁵³ Weinstein & Booth, 1966: 2.

in identifying albumen prints.⁵⁴

Cameras played an essential technical role in 'capturing' light to make images. During the collodion period, the camera became both larger and smaller, depending on the purpose for which it was intended. For stereoscopic and other first exposures effects, small cameras were essential. However, for exhibition and prints for sale, large cameras were required.⁵⁵

In his diaries, Atherstone described the various cameras that he had managed to purchase from the United Kingdom. He was constantly trying to upgrade his equipment to match European standards, in order to accommodate different plate sizes.

Nevertheless, constant upgrading failed to overcome the limitations posed by a non-existent shutter function. Exposures were usually controlled by a lens cap and when good definition was required, the diaphragm opening on the lens, was made very small. This meant long exposures and that only stationary subjects could be recorded. People who moved, would not appear in the picture. This explains why Atherstone's street scenes of Grahamstown appear deserted with faint blurred images of moving objects. Where a horse and cart moved half way through an exposure, a 'ghost' image would be formed and a faint representation could be seen when the animal was stationary. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, movement was capable of being registered on the faster plates. A moving ox wagon, or horse and cart, would appear as a continuous blur and a 'corridor' effect would result.⁵⁶ A person who was stationary at the beginning of an exposure, and then moved to another position before it had ended, would finish up with a 'double' image. Those who moved their heads would become decapitated.

Before the invention of the photograph, taking a photograph proved to be a fairly complicated process. After composing his picture on the glass ground screen, and placing his head under a black cloth, the operator would withdraw the screen and insert a dark slide. He would then stop the lens down to a working aperture, and place the lens cap on. With the pull-out removed from the dark slide, he would

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Gernsheim, 1988: 117.

⁵⁶ Bull & Densfield, 1970: 145.

uncap the lens, time the exposure and then replace the cap and pull out.⁵⁷

In 1867, in a letter to his son in England, Atherstone stated that he had "contrived a capital dark tent which fixes on the back of his cart." The plates were prepared within this tent with a black cloth over him, to prevent the plates from being spoiled prematurely. This tent was used for his collodion plate photography, and was even included as part of many of his compositions. This can be seen in *Figure 1*, which was taken by Atherstone in 1864 in the Howison's Poort Valley near Grahamstown.⁵⁸

Due to the heavy, bulk equipment required for his wet plate process, he used his horse-drawn cart to transport himself and his equipment to the desired location. Included in this equipment was his camera, a sturdy tripod, choice of lense, chest full of chemicals and prepared solutions, dishes, a good supply of glass plates, scales and weights, glass measures, funnels, pail to fetch water, focusing cloth and his portable dark tent.

The wet collodion process, which he favoured, was not only cumbersome, but tedious and time consuming due to long plate exposing. The black tents which he used in the preparation of his plates were suffocating in the hot African sun. However, this process did have its advantages. These advantages included improved detail and sensitivity.

Atherstone concerned himself not only with the wet and dry collodion processes, for he noted explicitly in his journals that other processes were also used. For example, 'Talbotype' (1843), 'Energrotype', 'Hyalotype'(1852), and of course the Daguerreotype (1848). He also employed 'Ambrotypes' or glass positives, although there is only one existing plate of a Grahamstown street. Early glass positives had a backing medium of black paper, cloth or velvet. Those with an opaque enamel applied to the undersurface of the glass were made available in 1856.⁵⁹ These glass positives made their appearance in the Cape in approximately 1854 and gained popularity with the arrival of the Carte De Vista in 1861. The Carte De Vista was obtained by eight exposures on a six and a half by eight and a half inch plate.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵⁸ Bull & Densfield, 1970: 146.

⁵⁹ Aver, 1975: 147.

The print was then cut up and mounted on cards approximately four by two and a half inches; the size of a visiting card at that time. Usually these cards portrayed a full figure portrait of a person standing next to a column or table, in front of velvet drapery. Thousands of Carte De Vistas portraying celebrities and royalty were sold, or simply were exchanged and collected.

In one of Atherstone's journals he notes that in letters sent to his son in England, between 1867-1868, he not only sent some of his photographs, "...but enlisted his help in obtaining photographic information..." This suggests that Atherstone was trying to keep up with developments in Europe during this time.⁶⁰ However, he also communicated with local Grahamstown photographers. In his journals, he makes mention of two 'local' photographers, namely Atkins and Green. Furthermore, he made noteworthy attempts to organize regular art exhibitions in the colony. In 1865, he was on the committee for 'The Grahamstown Graphic Society', which exhibited drawings, paintings and photographs and aimed at establishing a society for the encouragement of art. Both amateur and professional photographers were well represented on its committee. Unfortunately, their first planned exhibition did not take place, and nothing was heard of the society again.⁶¹ Atherstone also played an important role in organizing the 'Grahamstown Fine Art Exhibition' in 1858, which was the first general photographic display in the Cape. He also submitted work entitled "Photographic Scenery in the Eastern Province" to the 1867 'Paris Universal Exhibition'.⁶²

As is evident, Atherstone's work contributed greatly to the development of photography in Southern Africa. However, his importance extends beyond this. Atherstone epitomises the growth in scientific awareness throughout the nineteenth century. This awareness stimulated individuals to find solutions to problems posed by nature and the like. In other words, attempts to control light and time through photography, were simply attempts to tame nature and to assert the dominance of Europeans.

⁶⁰ Mathie, 1998: 348.

⁶¹ Bull & Densfield, 1970: 15.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

CHAPTER 3

According to Ryan, "Photographs, in particular have been used as windows on the past, in moods of both nostalgia and critique."⁶³ However, accurate interpretations of the past depend on the availability of biographic information. Unfortunately few images come with this type of documentation to facilitate such an exercise.⁶⁴ Samuel explains that it is important to put 'quotation' marks around historical photographs. In order to properly understand historical photographs it is necessary to contextualise them.

"...the power of these photographs is the reverse of what they seem. We may think that we are going to them for knowledge about the past, but it is the knowledge that we bring to them which makes them historically significant, transforming them into more or less chance residue of the past, into precious icons."⁶⁵

Photographs are ambiguous images since a multiplicity of meanings may be generated by the knowledge invested in them by their viewers. Photographs, or rather their meanings, are "cultural products", which move through historical time. Their "meaning resides not in the content per se, but in the production and equally important, the consumption of images."⁶⁶

In the case of Atherstone's photographs, their "life histories"⁶⁷ are determined to a lesser degree by the viewer's interpretation, as he documented the photographic site, town, and environs. However, it is still important to note that the depiction of photographs as "more or less transparent records of visual reality"⁶⁸ or 'windows of the world' that could allow for a complete and objective

⁶³ Ryan, 1997: 16.
⁶⁴ Geary, 1999: 2.

⁶⁵ Ryan, 1997: 16.
⁶⁶ Geary, 1999: 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

view of different times and places, is questionable. By focusing on an individual photographer's work, such as that of Atherstone, one tends perhaps paradoxically, to read their photographs as expressions of their vision. However, I agree with Ryan, that the photographic images simply do not speak for themselves or show the world through an innocent, historical eye. Rather, they are invested with meanings, formed and produced not necessarily by the photographer himself, but by specific cultural conditions and historical circumstances.

Furthermore, despite claims for photography's accuracy and trustworthiness, photography did not so much record the real, as signify and construct it.

Through various rhetorical and pictorial devices, including technical abilities, selection and classifications, photographers could represent the geographies, politics, economics and societies of the Empire.⁶⁹ According to Ryan, “not only did photography familiarize Victorians with foreign views, it enabled them symbolically to travel through; explore and even possess these spaces.”⁷⁰

Victorians used photography as a further means of entrenching a well established archive of stereotypes relating to Europe and the non-European world. For example, photographic representation of 'darkest Africa' or picturesque views of Western India, inherited much of their aesthetic from eighteenth century pictorial traditions and imagery. Yet, although it was based upon conventional imagery, the unique 'mimetic' capacity of photography to capture light in a two-dimensional image, made it a dramatically new means of representing the world.⁷¹

Scientists and artists seized upon photography as a natural process which allowed the world to represent itself. Thus, the nineteenth century photograph not only captured the realities of a foreign environment, but allowed the Victorians to represent themselves making history by conquering this environment.⁷² John Thomson, a photographer in 1892, explained that photography was seen to provide “a means of handing down a record of what we are, and what we achieved in this nineteenth

⁶⁹ Geary, 1999: 3.

⁷⁰ Ryan, 1997: 87.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁷² Becker, 1979: 92.

century of our progress.”⁷³ Photography helped close the 'gap' between home and away. Colonial photography had thus the ability “to conquer space and time through visualization.”⁷⁴

Atherstone’s photography is no exception. One cannot evaluate his pictures in isolation, rather it is important to acknowledge the double bias which has significantly affected our analysis. On the one hand, our own cultural and societal bias shapes the interpretation. On the other hand, Atherstone’s own biases shrouded in colonial mentality markedly alters the image. The image is further affected by the level of technical virtuosity of the time.⁷⁵

The following paragraphs set out to describe and interpret selected examples of Atherstone's work. His photographic record of early Grahamstown is especially valuable as he did not confine himself to conventional subjects and scenes.⁷⁶

These examples were obtained from Atherstone's glass plate negatives, and from his personal album which includes eighty-four photographs. As pointed out above, a Victorian album is personally and socially revealing. “The album is a 'living', social document, rich in its appeal to the imagination, and unique in its concrete, visual record of past experience” .⁷⁷ The selection and arrangement of the photographs contribute to the pervasive tone which suggests “the personality of the album, located in its time, space and social statement”⁷⁸. As a historical artifact, Atherstone's album is by no means a complete record, nor is it by any means objective. It is a cooperative product of photographer, family and people. Like many other Victorian albums, his album “feeds the creative imagination, posed, literal and restricted - yet it stimulates, with its detailed, multi-dimensional glimpses of colonial life in Grahamstown”.⁷⁹

⁷³ Ryan, 1997: 217.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*,p. 217.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*,p. 217.

⁷⁶ George, 1981: 43.

⁷⁷ Thomas, 1978: 43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*,p.43.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Family Groups

The power of Atherstone's album lies in the variety of persons, styles, activities and landscapes brought together within its covers. He lived in Thursford House on Beaufort Street. There are numerous photographs in his album and plate negatives showing the front of his house and parts of the garden from varying vantage points. *Figure 2* taken no later than 1864, shows the wedding group of Inez Atherstone and Henry Hayten. Their rather strained, unsmiling faces may be attributed to the lengthy exposure time, of probably ten seconds.⁸⁰ Their solemnity and stiff postures may also have arisen out of self-consciousness; from the awareness that they are exposing themselves to the camera. The group has been carefully composed, in order ensure that individual faces were not obscured. The pathway in the foreground as well as the diagonal, smaller pathway coming in from the left corner of the frame, help direct the viewer's eye to the most important couple, namely the new husband and wife. In the veranda group, the gentlemen and lady on the left and right respectively, help to formally contain the group. It is important to notice that both of them, as well as the little boy and three gentlemen on the above balcony, lean on the wooden gates and pillars for support. This can be attributed to the long exposure. One cannot help noticing the wall covered in the immediate foreground, with the exotic, overgrown bougainvillea; thereby engulfing the house. Though the two groups are separated by height, the hanging bougainvillea creeping on the central pillars help connect them compositionally. It is without doubt that Atherstone instructed the gentlemen to remove their top hats so as to prevent obscuring shadows from falling in their faces.

Figure 3 shows Mrs. Atherstone seated on an ornate bench, while their son's Walter and Guybon, are lying on the lawn together. The whole scene gives the viewer the impression of a well-laid out and established garden with a considerable variety of trees and shrubs in it.⁸¹ Van der Reit notes that the viewer is reminded of Atherstone's fascination with botany and that he was a founder of the Grahamstown Botanical Gardens. The rock walls running parallel to the two footpaths divides the frame into two separate entities. The controlled, evenly cut lawn which the figures occupy, contrasts with the

⁸⁰ Van der Riet, 1971:18.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

overgrowing dense, mysterious, uncontrolled backyard. Both Walter and Gabon focus directly on the camera, however Mrs. Atherstone looks distantly away from the lens. This captures the mentality of the settlers at the time. The home was a haven from the dangers of 'deep', 'dark' Africa. However, by looking into the distance, one gets the impression that the figure either longs for home or hopes to expand her presence in Africa in the future. The blurred bougainvillea in the right hand side of the frame was undoubtedly caused by wind on its branches during exposure. Photographs were typically used to accompany a letter 'back home', a more tangible means of keeping in touch with friends and relatives. *Figure 3* perhaps serves this purpose of showing a glimpse of 'imitated' life in Africa with its European clothes and exotic plants.

Atherstone photographed his family and friends with his large format plate cameras, and he also created stereographs. These images were made using a stereo-camera - an apparatus that could take two or more simultaneous images of the same scene through lenses placed side by side. The resulting exposed plates were then printed and glued side by side onto a firm cardboard support.⁸² When viewed through the lenses of a hand-held stereoscope which was invented in 1861, the two images seemed to merge into a three-dimensional scene. By the mid-1850's, the collection and viewing of stereotypes became widely popular. Stereoscopes were found as often in the drawing rooms of the 1850's and 1860's, as television sets in living rooms today.

Figure 4 is a stereograph which was selected due to its one noticeable imperfection, thereby highlighting the level of his technical virtuosity. Undoubtedly the two exposures were taken separately from each other, instead of simultaneously which was a necessary requirement to attain three dimensionality. The photograph shows Mrs. W. G Atherstone in a white dress seated next to her daughter Gertrude, in a black contrasting dress. The exposure on the left is sharp and clear presenting Mrs. Atherstone as focused on the camera, while her daughter's attention is grasped by something outside the left hand corner. The exposure on the right conclusively illustrates that both exposures were taken independently of each other as Mrs. Atherstone's face appears blurred from movement. This would not have occurred if Atherstone had taken them simultaneously. Mrs. Atherstone cuts a self-conscious, up-right pose,

⁸² Davenport, 1991: 183.

while Gertrude, perhaps slightly less interested and expressionless. Notice the strict etiquette of their attire for this occasion; after all, they were not dressing for their dearest and nearest, but for posterity.

Kowie Port

It is possible to deduce a class bias in the number and variety of photographs which connect places to families. Many proud owners of estates/mansions, extensive lawns and gardens, had prospects of these estates painted or photographed. These were placed alongside portraits of their forefathers and paintings of their champion horses. Similarly, members of the growing colony kept a record of their summer holidays on the coast or near rivers.⁸³ *Figure 5* is one of many varying photographs that Atherstone took of the Kowie river and Port Alfred where he had a holiday home.

Figure 5 shows Atherstone's family and friends picnicking in 'Mansfield Inlet' on the Kowie River. The group unconventionally occupy the bottom right hand corner of the frame on a rocky bank, isolated from the rest of the scene. The group of seven people express a sense of foreboding and solitude. Some of the individuals direct their gaze at the camera while the others again stare off into the 'unknown'. The *fynbos*-covered hill is silhouetted against the overexposed sky. The problem facing photographers when including the sky in their photographs, is that it imparts a tremendous amount of illumination, more than the land. Hence, the land requires a longer exposure than the sky. This explains why the sky in *Photograph #5*, and in many others, is featureless with no clouds in the resultant print.

On 15 January 1868, Atherstone enclosed photographs of three ocean-going vessels in the Port of Kowie which he noted were "indicative of the growth of the port". This was inserted by Guybon in the "Illustrative News" in London. *Figure 6a* and *6b*, are views of the developing Port of Kowie at Port Alfred, from two different vantage points. Both the embankments and railway line help to lead the viewer into the scene towards the sea and river mouth.

⁸³ Steel & Taylor, 1984: 242.

Surveying

The inventions and machines of the Industrial Revolution facilitated the further expansion of the colonial empires. The difficulties in maintaining imperial control over enormous distances were reduced by the telegraph and the application of steam power. These remote outposts at the “borders of darkness” were intended to expand and multiply.⁸⁴

This expansion continuously left deeper marks on the natural environment, as is evident in dense networks of railways and roads. In South Africa the new constructions of industrial technology - bridges, dams, railways, factories and mines - had lasting consequences. From the development of river navigation, to the introduction of penetrating railway lines, the country was irreversibly altered. It took photographers time to disregard their prejudice of what Africa looked like and to accept the changes that were taking place.⁸⁵ After having documented the sublimity of the African landscape, the photographers recorded these modifications and use of engineering, to ‘possess’ nature. Undoubtedly the photograph was a witness to human progress in the unexplored regions.

The railway and the steamboat were the symbols of colonial penetration⁸⁶; both of which were photographed by Atherstone. *Figure 7a* and *7b* show Atherstone's son, Guybon surveying railway camps at *Brookhuis ens Poort*. Both photographs appeared to have been taken on the same day. Notice the central, isolated tree, and the position of the central wagon flanked by the white tents. *Figure 7a* was taken from the one vantage point, while *Figure 7b* was perhaps taken from the opposite side of the camp, pointing towards where the camera was in *Figure 7a*.

Figure 7a is a far more relaxed and less 'contrived' image of the surveyor's camp. The individuals are aware of the camera, however, they sit more at ease. In the foreground of the composition, one must note Atherstone's portable dark room tent with all his equipment and chemical bottles beside it. Its black tent-like structure contrasts with the liveable white tents on either side of the background. These white

⁸⁴ Monti, 1987: 124.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

tents ironically contrast with the 'dark' African bush. The photographic techniques may have required a black tent, however the consequent unbearable heat absorbed by the tent, once again highlight the inability of these early photographers to adapt their equipment and techniques to the African context.

Figure 7b has been carefully composed. Surveyors stand besides their instruments of 'modernity' - their surveying cameras. The viewer's eye consistently sweeps across the print highlighting the different individuals who were staring at the camera whilst trying to keep as still as possible. Their careful presentation to the camera has a quiet theatricality. The existence of a sole tree, and the absence of further vegetation, suggests that the surveyors have already 'opened up' Africa behind them, thereby making space for further European immigrants.

Agriculture

Atherstone photographed a variety of agricultural practices, such as cattle being dipped and various other processes which suggest people's control over animals. *Figure 8a* and *8b* show people at work washing wool in an unidentified location. The foreground in *Figure 8a* is occupied by the water works and washing basins. Scattered around the basins are either full or empty whittle baskets. In the right hand side of the frame, a wool warehouse is visible. The middle ground looks like it is covered in fresh fallen snow, however, this is the wool been laid out to dry. Atherstone has carefully framed the picture illustrating the wool processing industry. There is an active spatial relationship between observer and observed and a heightening effect of stillness within the frame. It is clear that Atherstone had stopped them from their work to look at the camera, as long plate exposures would not have recorded the moving figures at work. This illustrates the interaction and dictation of the photographer and his subject matter. He thus "seizes a moment from the flow and process of existence and gives it intensity of movement, which emphasizes the theatricality of the event."⁸⁷ Atherstone's act of photography endowed this event with a permanence; thereby suggesting the established nature of settler industries and settler society in general.

⁸⁷ Edwards, 1994: 7.

Figure 8b was taken from the opposite side of the valley seen in *8a*. It shows the labourer's grass huts looking down upon the wool storage warehouse. This, once again, illustrates Atherstone's attempts to portray scenes from alternating vantage points.

Townscapes

The growing towns and commercial centers in the colony, not only offered markets for products such as wool, but also employment and opportunities for settlers. Grahamstown, during the mid-nineteenth century provided employment as well as subject matter like architecture and street scenes for photographers like Atherstone. His pictures offer a town modeled on European conventions; a frontier town of the British Empire. *Figure 9* is a view of Hill Street from Beaufort Street. The Presbyterian Church is on the left, opposite the stark, isolated white wagon stone in the foreground. Atherstone photographed down Hill street leading directly to the partly obscured cathedral, yet to have its upper steeple completed. The Presbyterian Church on the left side of the street, highlights the considerable Victorian energy devoted to church building in European architectural modes. Through Atherstone's bold and direct manner of photographing the street, one senses the wave of Europeanised culture passing through South Africa.

Figure 10 shows Grahamstown in its location. The stark white houses accompanied by exotic trees occupy the center of the composition. A granite outcrop juts into the somewhat picturesque scene with horses below in the adjacent valley. The ordered and developing buildings vividly illustrate the ornately furnished stamp of Victorian imperialism in Africa.

View or landscape photographs.

The last third of the eighteenth century was characterised by the industrial revolution and the increase of inventive discoveries. This, combined with an increase in the number of 'occupied' lands and the consequent discovery of an overseas nature, dramatically altered rural scenery.⁸⁸ After the second half of the 18th century, the feeling of nature also became an important theme in English literature. "The discovery of a vaster geographical universe; a growth in productive efficiency and a renewed sense of nature, combined with a recovery of spontaneity, formed a counterweight to the philosophy of the 'Age of Enlightenment.'"⁸⁹ This affected the aims of the revolutionary idealists who sought balanced situations and peaceful exchanges among the various peoples. These developments in industry, society and ideology were reflected in landscape photography.

The prospects for excursions opened up by Imperial expansion, profoundly amplified the Victorian taste for landscape photography. Moreover, this very idea of an Empire, depended in part, on the idea of a landscape involving controlled space and the means of representing such control, on a global scale.⁹⁰

According to Stegner, "Of all the varieties in photography, the landscape is the supreme test for the photographer."⁹¹ The photographer has to catch the fortunate combination of earth, sky and cloud, which he cannot compose or position. The power of landscape photography rests in its stillness. It has the ability to look at everything that is within the frame, right down to the last blade of grass. Whatever is captured by the camera is inescapable. The most irrelevant objects in the real scene can become the most relevant in the print.⁹² Conversely the strength of the landscape photograph lies in its ability to emphasise and to abstract the salient features of the subject.

A landscape was not something already 'out there' waiting to be recorded on glass or sketch pads.

⁸⁸ Monti, 1987: 77.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁹¹ Plowden, 1984: 7.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Rather, it amounted to a particular way of picturing and imaginatively approaching space by a detailed, individual spectator.⁹³ A photograph of a landscape or scene can convey scenes of wild grandeur, while simultaneously providing an exact visual encyclopedia. Documentary edification and sublimity mingled to create the final work of art. Van Gogh in fact maintained that "art is man added to nature."⁹⁴

Atherstone both 'tamed' the wild spaces in front of his camera, as well as documented spaces already colonized for the camera. *Figure 11* is a landscape view taken just outside of Grahamstown. A wagon filled with wool is positioned centrally in the frame. A young boy stares at the observer. The wagon and figure visually lead the observer's eye into the composition and provide a scale to the undramatic landscape behind them. The absence of an immediate foreground makes the position of the photographer or viewer an almost free-floating one, producing a vantage point overlooking the landscape. One can observe similarities to the paintings of the English countryside by John Constable, for example *Hamstead Heath (1821)* and *The Hay Man (1821)*. Like other colonial photographers, Atherstone could have "imposed the aesthetic contours of English scenery on the 'foreign' environment in which he lived; familiarizing and domesticating a potentially hostile landscape."⁹⁵ Indeed, the reality he was claiming to be the truth, could have been one of his own culture's making.⁹⁶ Yet, there is an unpassable 'actuality' about this photograph created by the 'real' face, clothing and observed relationships. This serves to keep it in 'check' and tied to the particular South African landscape.

Figure 12 again reminds the viewer of 'the aesthetic contours' of an English landscape. The rolling, interlocking spurs form a picturesque scene. This photograph differs from the previous one in terms of the pervasive sense of composure. Here, Atherstone expresses a sense of elemental pause and timelessness. This picture is simple in its elements, yet appears to be 'one with nature'. In effect this meeting of sky and valley, grass and trees, links man and nature in a simple yet, fundamentally profound experience. This meditative and timeless view must surely be a result of Atherstone's escape from the busy and growing Grahamstown. A carefully selected composition is evident in this seemingly

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹⁵ Ryan, 1997: 46.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

uninteresting photograph.

Figure 13 is perhaps one of the most interesting photographs in Atherstone's album. It shows three carefully posed figures on rocks in a river. The two ladies dressed in full Victorian attire occupy the upper reaches, while a young boy, possibly one of Atherstones', sits below in the center. The boy's gaze is directed at the camera, while the ladies look towards the engulfing, surrounding vegetation. Occupying the lower left corner of the frame is a dense black pond in the river, surrounded by encroaching vegetation. A rock juts out from the left bottom corner of the composition, leading the eye directly to the seated figures. The entire composition is framed by overhanging branches on either side of the river. The branches closest to the camera appear blurred, possibly due to the effect of wind during the exposure. This contrasts with the stiff postures of the ladies. In general, this photograph highlights the contrast between the cultural antiquity of the old continent and the 'dark', unpredictable lands of Africa. The ladies here seem to be pensively contemplating Africa's unpredictability and natural beauty; an unaffordable luxury, yet a real danger.

Photography was of course only one medium used in the picturing of foreign landscapes. It was often used in conjunction with other forms and conventions of representation, such as travel writing and cartography.⁹⁷ Thus, this expansion of landscape photography highlights an inevitable progression of 'culture' and 'civilisation' into 'natural space'; progress that is itself narrated as natural.⁹⁸

Hunting

In twentieth century Western society, photography simply involves 'loading', 'aiming' and 'shooting'. The camera has become what Sontag has described as a "sublimation of the gun".⁹⁹ This process of sublimation was well under way in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly within the discourse and practice of Victorian hunting.

⁹⁷ Ryan, 1997: 66.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹⁹ Sontag, 1979: 132

From the late 1850's, explorers, soldiers, administrators and professional hunters began to employ the camera to record images of dead animals for scientific documentation and as evidence of their hunting achievements. Yet despite the wealth of this photographic record in published accounts, official records and private albums, the place of photography within the ritual of colonial hunting has barely been considered.¹⁰⁰

The colonial hunter was one of the most striking figures of the Victorian and Edwardian Imperial landscape.¹⁰¹ The hunter is, to present day ideas, the archetypal colonial figure; frequently pictured as posed with a gun besides his recently killed prey or surrounded by skins, tusks and other trophies. The most famous big-game hunters are still remembered as heroic adventurers, intrepid explorers, accomplished naturalists and perhaps ironically, as the pioneers of conservation. Hunting, was however, not limited to those who made it a full-time career. Many British colonial administrators, soldiers, settlers and travelers participated in the chase and killing of wild animals, for the purpose of sport and science.

“The images of hunting frequently picture the hunter as the manly, romanticized adventurer and hero of the Empire. The hunting collection of trophies was intimately associated with the ideology of the Empire. Hunting continuously played a highly significant role within colonial expatriate culture.”¹⁰²

Barthes noted that the “hunting photograph demonstrates the operation of cameras as 'clocks for seeing', and that photograph's intimate relation to death is a certification of a presence that has been.”¹⁰³

One particular photograph taken by Atherstone comprises of a group of men in front of a wagon cart. Several negatives exist of this same scene from various view points and on various plate sizes. The hunter and his colleagues adopt the conventional stance of the victorious huntsman and/or landowner. This confident pose contrasts with the seemingly sad and pathetic antelope hanging on the wagon.

¹⁰⁰ Ryan, 1997: 99.

¹⁰¹ Ryan, 1997: 99.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Hunting was to become a major form of social bonding orientated exclusively around men. “Its encouragement of manly virtues of courage and chivalry were seen as corrective to effeminacy.”¹⁰⁴ It is important to note here the absence of women in Atherstone’s photographs. As Ryan suggests, “this rise of big game hunting and its presentation as a manly occupation, might thus be partly seen as one response to the increasingly assertive visibility of particular groups of women in late Victorian society, notably the suffragettes.”¹⁰⁵ Many hunters celebrated the ‘outdoor life of absolute freedom’ as a refuge not only from modern, industrial Britain, but also from growing challenges exerted by women. As one African hunter put it, hunting provides freedom “from the remembrance of ‘her’ at home”. A number of well known hunters were strongly opposed to women's attempt to break from their conventional confinement within the domestic sphere.¹⁰⁶ Hence, the camera was used as a means of ‘glossing’ over these growing challenges by focusing on the ‘stable’ social and familial hierarchy. Furthermore, in an attempt to reverse these increasing challenges to patriarchal dominance, photography was used as a means of perpetuating sexual stereotypes of the manly hunter and weak, docile mother and wife.

Photograph # 14 contrasts with this manly occupation of hunting. It shows the profile of a women standing on a veranda, silhouetted against the African sky. The women portrays a lonely figure suggesting the conventional confinement of the women at home, while the men are away.

Dr Atherstone’s photography acts as an example of a 19th Century phenomenon, in which the imparting of Victorian values through colonialism, had both a scientific and social impact on Africa. One needs to interpret Atherstone’s images beyond the topographical and documentary; their value arises from the insight they offer into the mindset of that time.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁰⁶ Ryan, 1997: 110.

CHAPTER FOUR

In this chapter a brief discussion of my own approach to photography is examined with reference to the selection of subject matter, composition, lighting and the position of the camera. I will also compare these approaches against those adopted by Atherstone. The practical component of my research intended to set out and illustrate visually some of the contrasts and similarities that exist between the west and east sides of Grahamstown, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.

These two sides have been historically dubbed as the poor 'black' township and the 'white' affluent side, however, these labels hold little relevance today in post - Apartheid South Africa. One cannot deny that the storm runoff drain (Kowie Ditch) separates two economically unequal areas, however political, social and economic developments have ensured to varying degrees, that interactions between the two sides no longer occur solely on a racially unequal basis. This can be seen in the rise of a black middle class in the historically 'white' side of Grahamstown, thereby explaining my portrayal of this side as racially heterogenous.

Nevertheless, class, cultural, architectural and landscape dissimilarities continue to permeate this town, like so many throughout South Africa. However, these differences were not my sole focus. The similarities are not as pronounced, but by looking at musicians, schools, cemeteries, street scenes and work places, I hoped to show that even though our tasks are different our 'work' is the same.

My intention was not to humiliate by portraying ignorance, poverty and violence as journalistic sensation tends to do. Nor was it my intention to turn the people of Grahamstown into passive icons of wealth and poverty. Instead I attempted to show the humanistic qualities of life, as I saw them. I attempted to be impartial with regards to the sensitivity that I used to both sides, however true impartiality is a myth. My choice of subject matter, lighting, position of camera and so forth, influenced the imagery I pursued. From the outset, my goal was not to take a completely objective stance, instead I strove for some truth and honesty when expressing what I perceive of my subjects.

My working methods were simple as to ensure that I was not distracted by unnecessary technicalities, thereby allowing me to concentrate on the subject that was being photographed. All the photographs in my exhibition were shot with Pentax 67 bodies and lenses, however exploration with the 35 mm format was used to create some diversity and spontaneity. Various films including Agfa Optima 100, Ilford HP5 and HP4, infrared, lithochromatic and Agfa Ultra films were used to facilitate limitless experimentation and diversity.

Generally, prints were made using full negative. Though I have nothing against minimal cropping, I wanted it not to change the overall structure and content of the picture as seen at the time of exposure.

I have realised through both my practical and theoretical research that dissimilarity and similarities exist between my work and that of Atherstone, in terms of subject matter and technical capabilities. Though one hundred and forty years apart, both Atherstone and I used Grahamstown as our subject matter. However, this time gap has meant different social attitudes and prejudices as well as different technical capabilities, thereby resulting in remarkably different portrayals of the people and streets of this little town.

This 'gap' is most evident in the camera equipment used. The cameras that I have used, though heavy, were less cumbersome and bulky than those used by Atherstone. This has allowed greater mobility and creativity. Not only could a wider range of subject matter be photographed but diverse camera angles could be utilised. Atherstone photographed at eye level, however due to improved and varied lenses and tripods I have achieved greater control, creativity and variation.

This control is further evident in my use of artificial and natural light. Atherstone relied on bright sunny days, however all those who know Grahamstown realise that these are not always forthcoming. I was able to utilise reflective and incident light during overcast days and in the evening, through time exposures similar to those of Atherstone's; and the use of electronic flash lights and tungsten torches. Electronic light meters facilitated correct exposures which Atherstone had to guess through trial and error. These technical improvements allowed me to overcome problems experienced by Atherstone, for example in photographing the moon at night.

A further problem experienced by Atherstone was his inability to capture movement. Due to the presence of a shutter function and improvements in the chemicals used in emulsions, I could purposely portray and manipulate movement for effect. Although blurred images often continue to appear I used these to my advantage while Atherstone attempted to escape from this 'flaw'.

Due to improved emulsions in film loaded cameras, thirty six exposures are now possible without all the tedious problems faced by the one plate exposures used by Atherstone. The improved sensitivity of films, as well as developing and fixing chemicals has advanced what used to be a tedious process.

Discoveries and improvements of chemicals has allowed for the use of colour in photography today. Atherstone's prints were all in monotone, however I strove to portray Grahamstown in both colour, and black and white, thereby allowing for greater visual diversity.

Greater diversity in my exhibition was also achieved by my use of the *camera obscura*, and the use of a pin hole camera. I attempted to create some of my images through twentieth century eyes by using nineteenth century equipment, thereby increasing my appreciation of Atherstone's work.

Atherstone could not make enlargements from his negatives. He could only make reprints of his negatives by contact printing his original negatives, resulting in a positive the same size as his negative.

The one hundred and forty years separating Atherstone's work from mine can certainly be observed in his limited range and means of taking photographs. This can be attributed to the limited technical discoveries and developments at that stage.

The distinction between Atherstone's work and mine can be further noticed in the way in which the subject matter was approached. Atherstone's work, shrouded in colonial racism and patriarchal attitudes, is remarkably different from my gender and racially inclusive approach. This can be attributed to the contrasting cultural and social biases of the respective times.

My tendency to adopt a seemingly impartial stance to both sides of Grahamstown is not because I am

striving for an exact replica of life divorced from my subjective experiences. This can be attributed to the times in which we currently live, where a universal respect for all people has been fostered and cultivated. Hence, like Atherstone and other photographers, past and present, subjective experiences and prejudices continue to influence the photographic process.

CONCLUSION

For the early photographer, the new combination of illumination, lens, shutter and sensitive chemically coated surfaces produced images in a short time, which could possibly be more lasting and more convincing in their reality and detail than paintings, which were produced over weeks and often months.

“...while photography certainly inherited many aesthetic conventions from painting, the indexical status of the photographic image, together with the ability of the photographer to control completely the framing of the world by the camera - as opposed to the greater degree of control exercised by painters - made photography recognizably different from painting and other graphic arts.”¹⁰⁷

Photography, though initially developed in Europe, was transported to Africa and used by Europeans as another form of colonisation. Not only did it try and ‘colonise time and space’, but it was an important vehicle through which European ideologies could be entrenched. Furthermore, as it was initially a European construction, it remained unsuited to the African climatic and geographical conditions. Hence, individuals such as Atherstone were responsible for adapting it to the African context, thereby consolidating photography as an important element in colonial society.

Dr. Atherstone's photographs provide fascinating insight into the historical dynamics of the field of photography in nineteenth century South Africa. His images have resided in the contested terrains of documentation/ethnographic photography and art. The strange and beautiful landscapes with their harsh light, varying geographical conditions, developing towns, and multi-racial populations, presented Atherstone with new exciting challenges. Although most of his photographs were intended to be faithful recordings of his surroundings, “photography was also a social practice whose meanings could be structured through cultural codes and conventions.”¹⁰⁸

Photography and its application in nineteenth century Africa, is a monument to a lost, imperialist period

¹⁰⁷ Ryan, 1997: 18.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

characterized by an atmosphere of excitement, heroism and scientific discovery. Photography was a vital ingredient in, as well as illustrator of, the Victorian culture of spectacle.¹⁰⁹ As one of the key wonders of this age, photography was regarded as one of the most powerful means of revealing the 'realities' of Africa, and Britain's expanding presence in it. The camera thus allowed imperialist and patriarchal codes and conventions to be entrenched in Africa.

Prior to Atherstone's death in 1898, the introduction of smaller cameras and fast films on the market, substantially reduced the difficulty of photography and the amount of experience needed. The role of the photographer began to change, as did the type of photograph. The efficiency of modern photography meant that almost any event could be captured on film without the formalities of rigid posing and elaborate preparation, that characterized much of nineteenth century photography. This change is reflected in the enormous quantity of pictures taken, and the wide variety of backgrounds used.¹¹⁰ The camera is now more accessible to the masses; offering wider varieties of models, films and applications.

It is delightful to see nineteenth century Grahamstown with twenty-first century eyes. Victorian biases appear clearer to us now, however, we too are governed by cultural, societal and economic prejudices. Although increased technological innovations have significantly altered the role of the photographer, capturing an exact reflection of life, continues to remain an unattainable ideal. Prejudices held by both the photographer, and the observer, continue to alter the interpretation of the scene and the image. This does and probably will in future, significantly hinder the universal quest for a perfect, 'true' facsimile of the world.

¹⁰⁹ Ryan, 1997: 6.

¹¹⁰ Monti, 1987:10.

GLOSSARY

Albumen: Egg white used with a variety of light sensitive solutions on either a glass base or paper base, to improve adhesion of the emulsion on varying surfaces.

Ambrotype Process: This process was developed in 1881 using a 'collodion positive on glass' which is a special application of William Scott Archer's wet collodion process. This depended on Herschel's observation that a negative viewed by reflection against a dark background is seen as a positive. A wet collodion, mixed with cyanide or hypo was covered with dark varnish made from bitumen of Judaea. This was placed either on the back or on the emulsion side. The disadvantage of this process was that it was unable to yield copies, as it dealt with positives.

Camera Lucida: A person could draw the profile of the sitter by the illumination of a light source coming from behind the sitter. This is drawn on to a screen placed between the person and the sitter.

Camera Obscura: The original concept which had a pinhole and created an image in a darkened room on the opposite wall from the pinhole, or in a small portable box.

Caption: Descriptive information about a picture.

Carte de Vista: A portrait affixed to a cardboard mount. Produced in thousands, they are the most readily accessible of all old photographs.

Contact Prints: A same size print of a negative or strip of negatives made by placing the negative in direct contact with the paper,

Cropping: The removal of unwanted sections of an image.

Daguerrotype: Process announced by Louis Jaques Mande Daguerre in 1839 in Paris. Earliest successful photographic process. It produced a direct positive image, made on highly polished silver

copper plate and sensitised to light by exposure to iodine vapour.

Developer: Chemical bath which amplifies and corrects the latent image to black metallic silver, producing a visible image.

Development: The system of processing the exposed image to black metallic silver. The essential items to check for accurate development are the type of developer; the condition of the solution; the type and temperature of development and the degree of agitation required.

Dry Plate Process: The gelatine dry plate negative replaced the wet collodion method as it could be made in advance. A glass plate was coated with a gelatine emulsion instead of collodion to make the plate more sensitive. This was made by mixing melted gelatine with a halide such as silver nitrate. The plate was then dried and stored away. After an exposure to light, the image was fixed in a solution of hypo. Finally the negative was washed.

Electronic Flash: Light source produced by creating a spark between electrodes contained within a gas filled tube. A single tube will produce many thousands of flashes.

Emulsion: The light sensitive material that is coated on a suitable base to produce the various types of film and printing materials used in photography. It consists of silver halides suspended in a variety of chemicals.

Enlargement: Print larger than the negative size. Often referred to as a projection print.

Exposure: Exposure in the photographic sense, is the product of light intensity and the time the light is allowed to act. Intensity is controlled with aperture and shutter speed adjustment.

Fixation: Chemical procedure in the processing cycle of negatives and prints. Converts unused silver halides to a soluble silver complex.

Fixed focal length: Camera system whose lens cannot be interchanged for another lens of different focal length.

Fixer: A chemical solution that ‘fixes’ the photographic image on negatives or photographic paper making it permanent.

Focusing: Method of moving the lens in relation to the camera back to form a sharp image on the sensitised paper, glass or film.

Gelatine: Medium used in sensitised emulsion for the suspension of the light sensitive silver halides.

Glass Plate Negatives: The limited transparency of early paper negatives imposed a limit on the amount of definition that the negative could resolve. Glass plates were an improved medium for this. The glass was cut to the right size for the camera and covered with a light sensitive layer. It was placed in a camera and exposed to light before being developed and fixed to create an image of a scene.

Ground Glass Screen: Translucent glass panel fixed to a camera as an aid to viewing and focusing an image on a suitable plane.

Hypo: abbreviation for hyposulfite of soda, itself a term incorrectly applied to sodium thiosulfate. “Hypo” has become the common usage for a fixing solution. First phrased by Sir John Herschel.

Incident Light: Light falling on a surface or subject.

Lens: Single element or multiple collection of glass surfaces, capable of bending light. There are two main types, these being *positive* (convex) and *negative* (concave). Positive causes rays of light to converge to a point while negative causes rays of light to diverge from a point.

Light: Form of energy that makes up part of the electro-magnetic spectrum.

Monochrome: A term used for a picture with only one colour, usually referring to black and white.

Negative: The image produced on a sensitised surface (glass, paper or film) by the product of exposure and development.

Perspective: The illusion of three-dimensional depth within a two dimensional space.

Pinhole: An enclosed container of any size with a small hole in one of its sides. Depending on the hole size and distance of the hole from the opposite wall, an inverted image is projected onto this enclosed wall. In order for this image to be projected, the box must be closed from all other light.

Positive: Opposite of the negative. Often the second stage of the photographic process where tones are reproduced. These are similar, in terms of relative intensity, to those of the subject.

Reflection: When rays of light strike a surface and bounce back, they are said to reflect from that surface.

Sensitivity: The photosensitive response of an emulsion.

Sepia: A dark, reddish-brown pigment.

Shutter: Mechanical means of controlling the time during which light is allowed into the camera.

Stereocameras: Cameras usually with two or four lenses which could record simultaneously two or four prints respectively of the same scene at slightly different angles. This would create a three dimensional effect when seen through a special viewer.

Stereographs: Based on the principle that when looking at an object, the left and right eyes see slightly different views, so that a three dimensional effect can be achieved. This is facilitated by placing two pictures, one for each eye, taken from slightly different viewpoints, in a special viewer.

Tungsten: Light source consisting of a tungsten filament contained within the glass envelope. The tungsten produces intense light when an electrical current is passed through it.

Viewpoint: Position of the camera in relation to the subject. When viewpoint is altered, perspective is changed.

Wet Collodion Process: (1850) Collodion is a suitable guncotton (pyroxyln) dissolved in a mixture of ether and alcohol. The first stage of this process was to dissolve bromide and iodide salts in collodion. A clean glass plate was then coated with this solution. When dry, the plate was immersed in a silver nitrate solution. The silver nitrate reacts with the collodion to form either silver iodide or silver bromo-iodide which both make glass much more sensitive. The wet glass plate was exposed and then immediately covered with a developer to process it. The negative is then fixed in a strong solution of hypo and washed as in other processes. Finally the negative was given a protective covering of spirit varnish.

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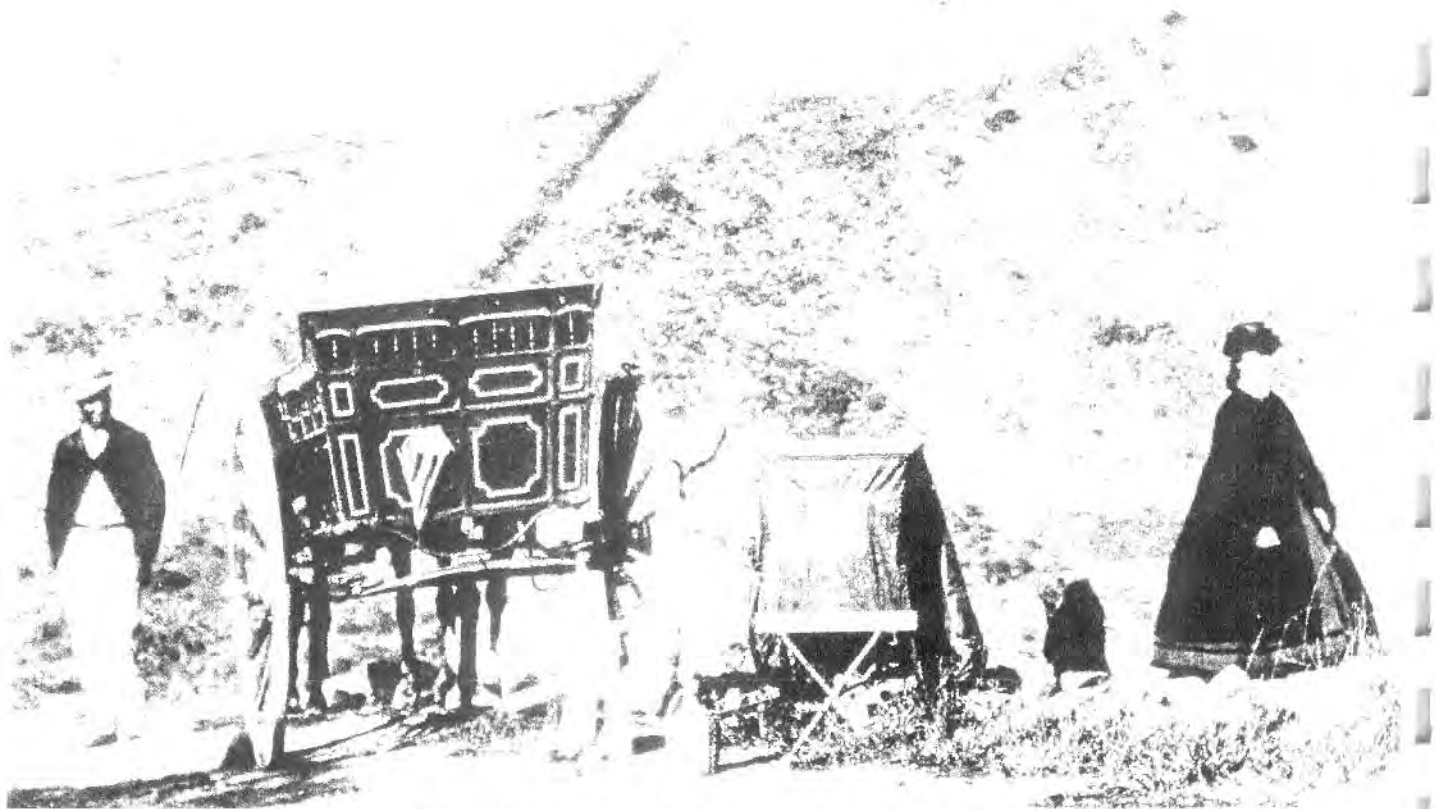


Figure 1: A portable dark room tent on the right hand side of the horse drawn carriage. Howison's Poort Valley near Grahamstown. 1864. Larger than original. (From Van Der Riet collection, Albany Museum)

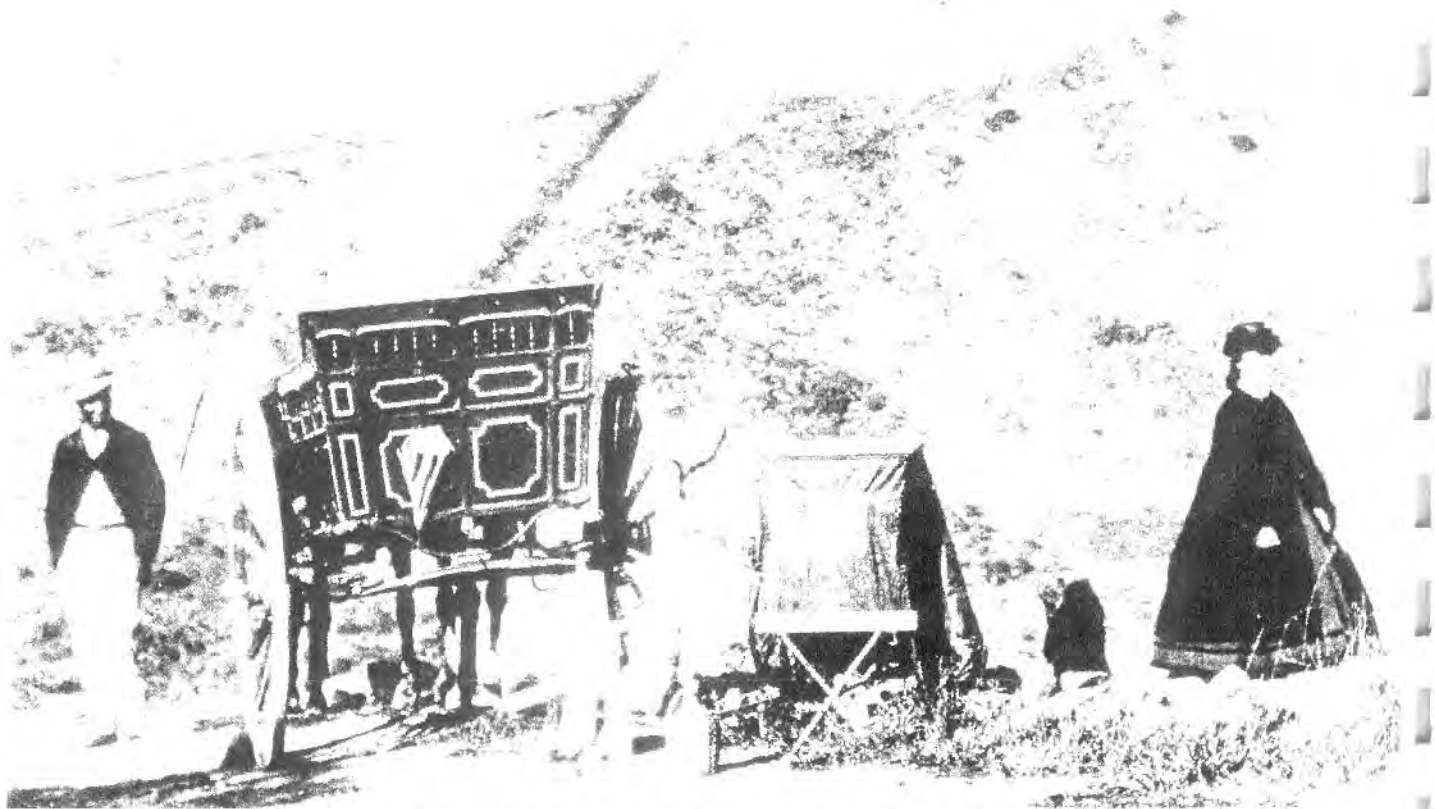


Figure 1: A portable dark room tent on the right hand side of the horse drawn carriage. Howison's Poort Valley near Grahamstown. 1864. Larger than original. (From Van Der Riet collection, Albany Museum)



Figure 2: Wedding group of Inez Atherstone and Henry Hayten at “Thursford House” Grahamstown. 1864. To scale. (From Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 3: "Mrs. W.G. Atherstone and her sons Guybon and Walter". 1868. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).

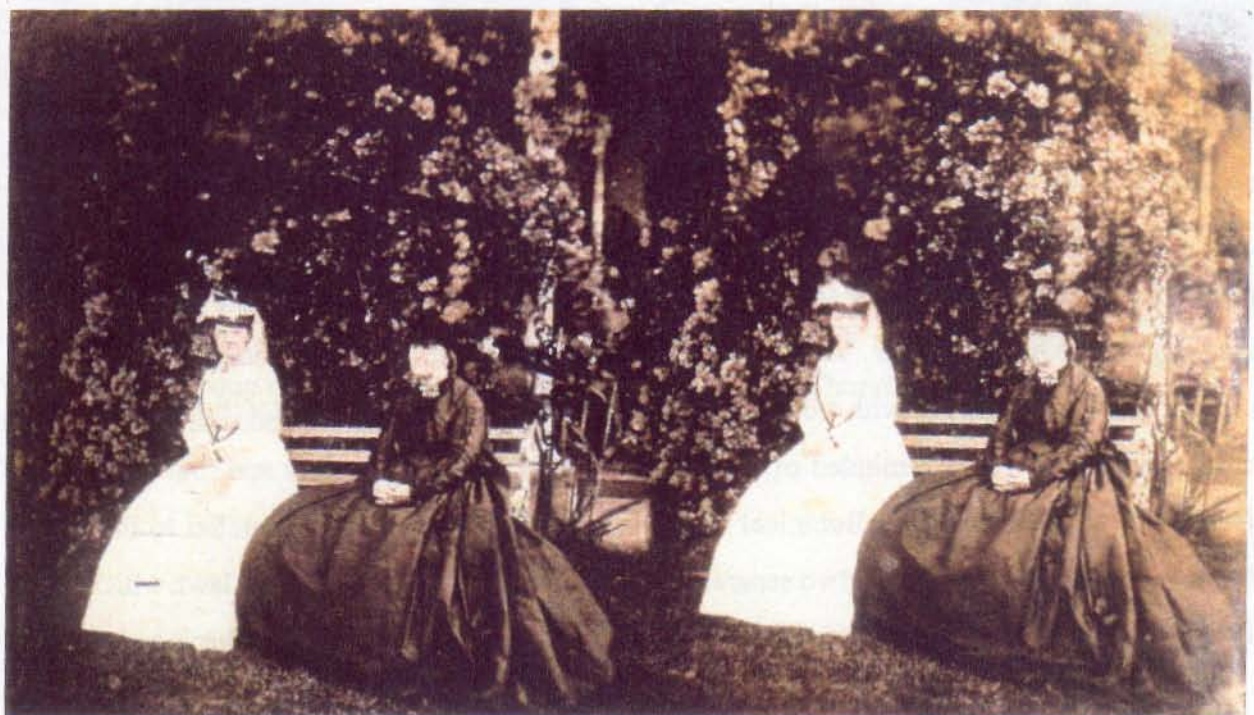


Figure 4: Stereograph. "Mrs. W.G. Atherstone and her daughter Gertrude". Thursford House. To scale. 1870. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



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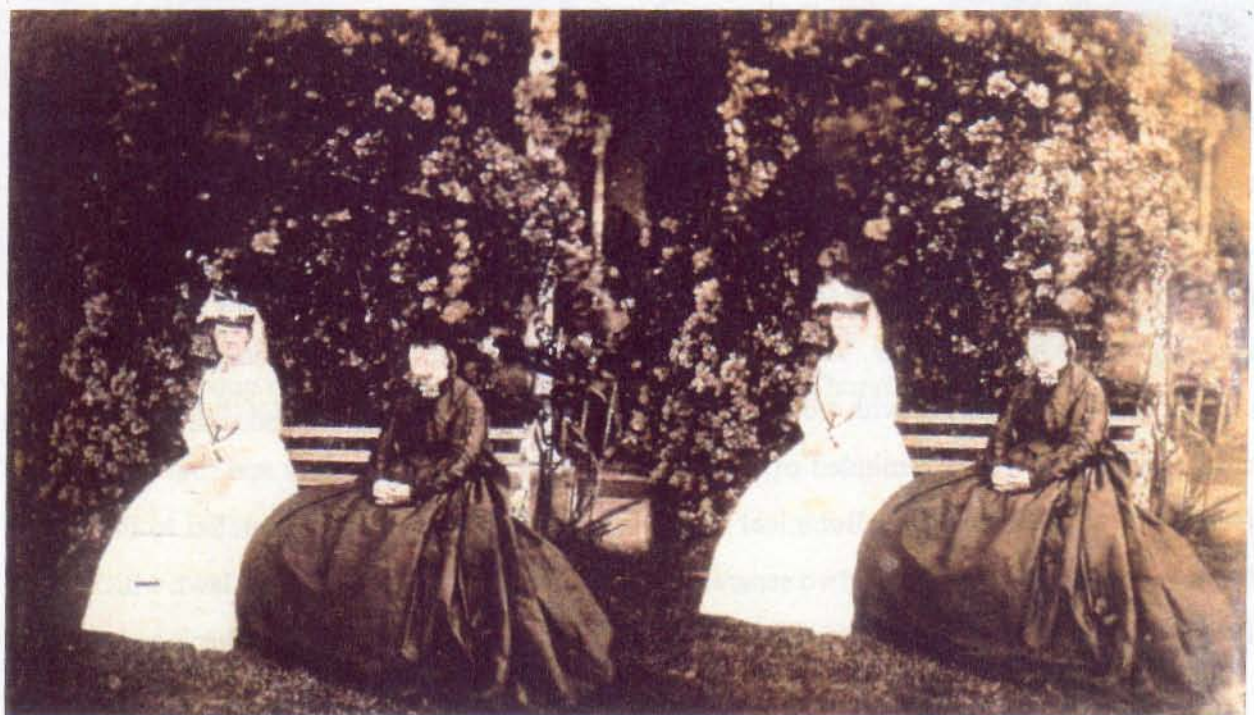


Figure 4: Stereograph. "Mrs. W.G. Atherstone and her daughter Gertrude". Thursford House. To scale. 1870. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 5: Atherstone family and friends picnicking at “Mansfield Inlet”, Kowie River. To scale. Dare Unknown. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).

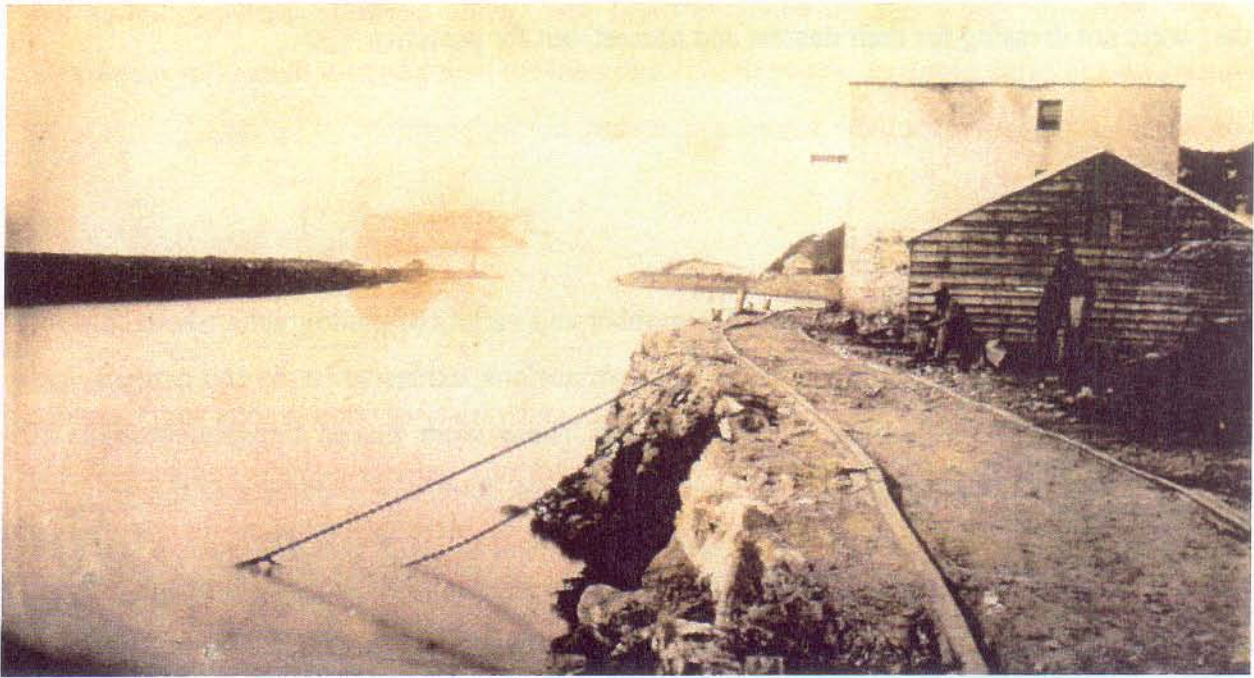


Figure 6a: “Old mill, Kowie River mouth”. Looking out to sea. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 6b: “Old mill, Kowie River”. Taken from a higher vantage point than 6a. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 7a: "Camp of Guybon Atherstone. Railway surveyor - Brookhius ens Poort", outside of Grahamstown. 1865, To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 7b: "Guybon D Atherstone's railway survey. Brookhius ens Poort". Outside Grahamstown. 1865, taken from opposite side *Figure 7a*. To scale. (Atherstone Album).

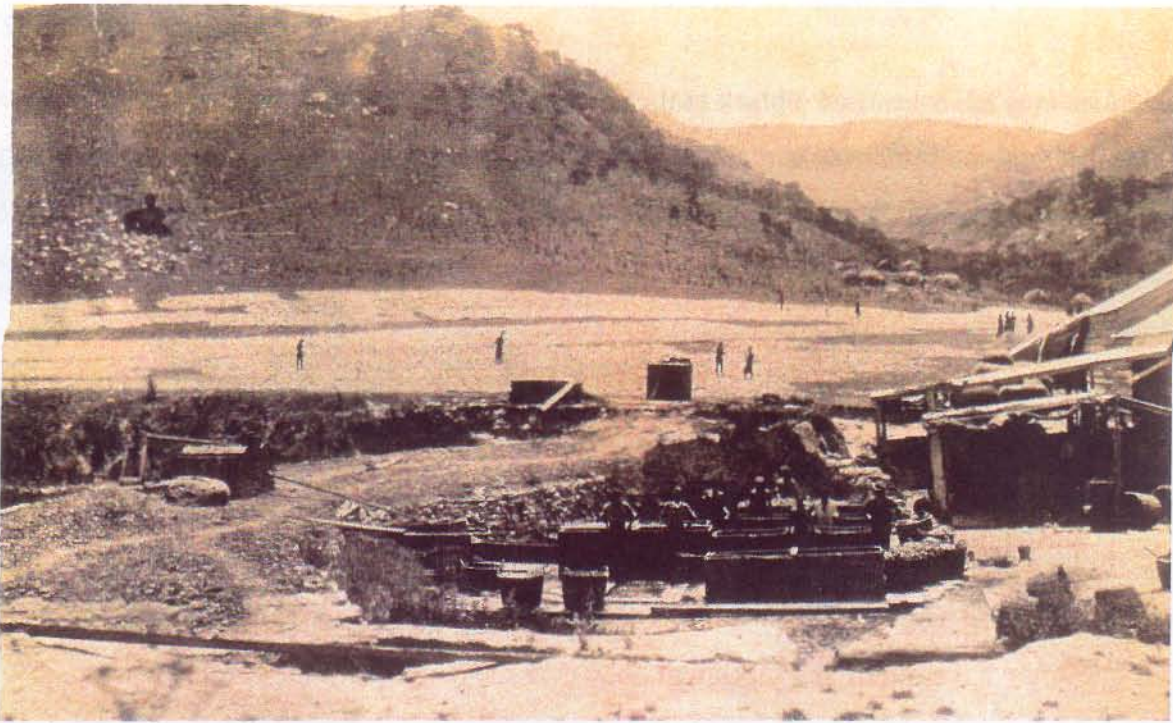


Figure 8a: Scene showing wool washing. Unidentified location. 1860's. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 8b: Scene showing wool storage shed in valley from opposite side of valley to Figure 8a. 1860's. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 9: View down Hill Street from Beaufort Street with Presbyterian Church on left. Late 1860's. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 10: View from West side of valley looking towards Grahamstown. Early 1870's. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).

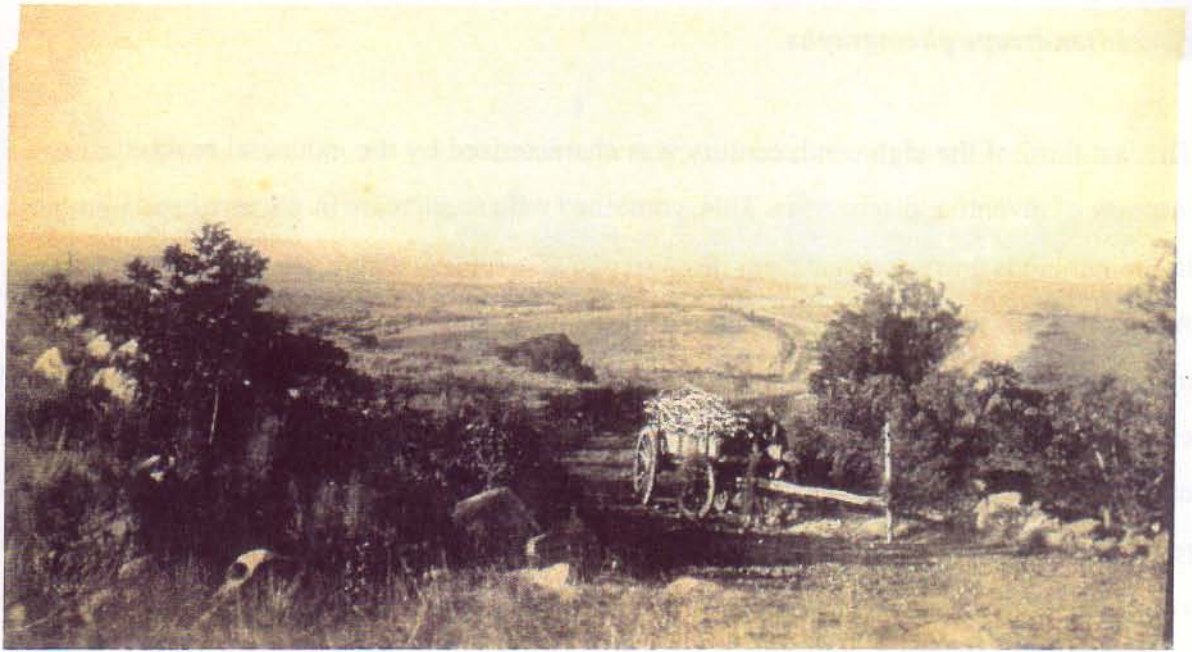


Figure 11: Wagon with young black boy on road outside Grahamstown. Late 1860's. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 12: Interlocking valleys just outside Grahamstown. Late 1860's. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).



Figure 13: Mrs. W.G. Atherstone with daughter Gertrude and son Walter standing and seated on rocks in a river. Late 1860's. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).

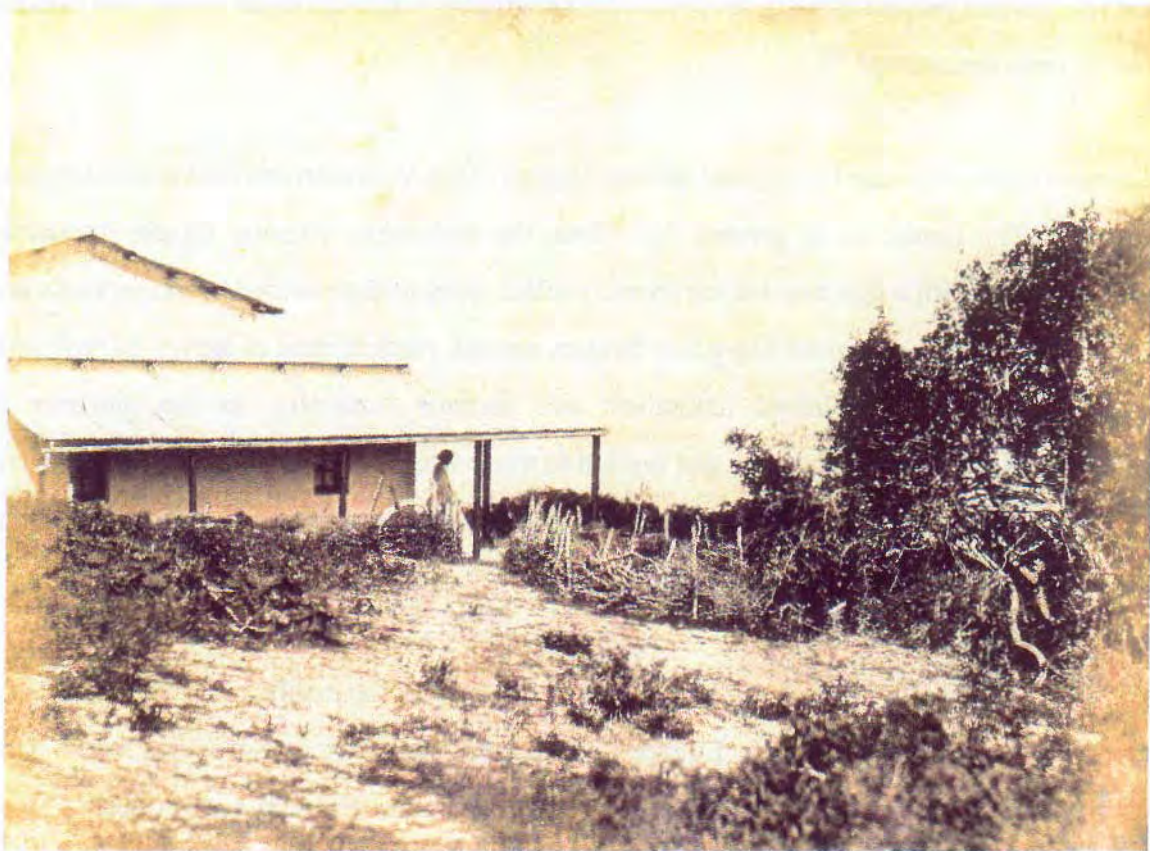


Figure 14: Two women one standing, and one seated on veranda at the Pavilion Kowie. Early 1860's. To scale. (Atherstone Album, Albany Museum).