

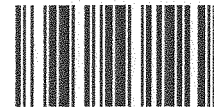
Citation Information

18 October 2012

Journal: **History of photography**

Document ID: 739967

Article: **Taken from Life: Post-Mortem Portraiture in Britain, 1860-1910**



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Patron: arlir, delivery

ISSN: 0308-7298



EISSN:

Volume: **30**

Issue: **4**

Quarter:

Season:

Number:

Month:

Day:

Year: **2006**

To: 205.227.91.137



Pages: **309 - 347**

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Taken from Life: Post-Mortem Portraiture in Britain 1860–1910

Audrey Linkman

Only a tiny minority of the family photograph collections assembled in Britain between 1860 and 1910 includes post-mortem portraits. These could have been acquired through private commission by relatives of the deceased or purchased as part of the retail trade in commercial portraits of celebrities. The very small number of articles devoted to the subject in the photographic press confirms that photographers consciously attempted to portray the dead as if sleeping. Surviving photographs reveal how this intention influenced all aspects of the portrait, including the treatment of the face, the pose and lighting of the body, and the choice of background and accessories. The motives behind the acquisition of posthumous portraits remain more obscure: some can be ascertained from entries in diaries and correspondence; others can be inferred through reference to contemporary attitudes towards death and the rituals observed by the bereaved. By suppressing evidence of the unpleasant aspects of death and by suggesting a more familiar state of being, post-mortem portraits were intended to ease the pain of loss and bring solace and comfort to the bereaved.

Keywords: *post-mortem, death, portraiture, Britain, Victorian*

When the new technology of photography emerged as a practical working proposition in the 1840s its first major commercial application was portraiture. Photography proceeded to mechanise a long-established thriving trade in the sale of hand-crafted likenesses. In order to do this, photographers appropriated a set of ideologies and practices that had been developed over centuries by painters working with oil on canvas. Post-mortem portraiture was one of the established practices that photographers inherited from their predecessors. According to Anton Pigler, the Western European practice of portraying the dead in paintings, drawings and prints began in the fifteenth century and spread throughout the continent from France to Hungary, including Britain and parts of Scandinavia.¹ Surviving examples feature portraits of monarchs, the nobility, clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, with occasional representations from other social classes, including artists and their relatives. Photography continued this tradition of posthumous portraiture and extended the practice throughout the social classes.

This paper considers two types of post-mortem portrait which found their way into family photograph collections in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain: portraits privately commissioned by the deceased's relatives; and commercial portraits of the dead sold over the counter to the public. It is not concerned with photographs taken for police records or with images of the dead resulting from accident, war or disaster.

1 – Anton Pigler, 'Portraying the Dead', *Acta Historiae Artium Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 4 (1956), 1–75.

Sources—Photographic Press

A discreet reticence characterises all discussion of post-mortem portrait photography in the specialist photographic journals in Britain in the nineteenth century. There are very few articles of any significance giving practical advice to photographers on the issues surrounding post-mortem commissions. Since portraiture of the living person constituted the major commercial preoccupation of the period, it would be exceptional to find any individual issue that did not include articles or features discussing some aspect of portrait practice. By contrast, fewer than a dozen articles devoted to post-mortem work appeared in the two major weekly publications during the nineteenth century, and those were confined to the 1870s and 1880s. *The Photographic News* reprinted two articles (or selected parts) written by American photographers, John L. Gihon of Philadelphia and Charlie Orr of Sandwich, Illinois. These were initially intended for a transatlantic readership and described procedures in America. As we shall see, practices and attitudes in Britain did not mirror the approach of their American counterparts. A third article appeared in the *News* in 1880 as part of a humorous series 'Prints from Old Negatives' recalling incidents in the colourful career of a photographer called George Bradforde. Bradforde wrote in the first person describing a visit to photograph the body of a man who had died of diphtheria.

The British Journal of Photography allocated a little more space to the subject and displayed a preference for articles by British writers. In 1873 the summons of the firm of W. & D. Downey to photograph the exiled Emperor Napoleon III on his deathbed at Chislehurst prompted a 'leaderette' on the practical ways of achieving good results in this line of work. In 1875 'Mark Oute' devoted one of his lively tales of photographic life to this subject, describing a photographer's visit to a country cottage to photograph the body of a little boy who had met with a fatal accident. 'Mark Oute' was the nom-de-plume of the Glasgow-based, photographic dealer, George Mason. According to his obituarist, writing in 1901, Mason was much admired as a raconteur of the 'doings of the photographic world', because his long experience of it 'had endowed him with a rich store of historical knowledge of a kind not to be found in printed records'.² We may therefore assume that the photographic detail described in his sketches is broadly accurate but the characters and incidents are selected for dramatic effect.

Perhaps the most reliable article on the subject came from the occasionally peevish pen of C. Brangwin (sometimes Brangwyn) Barnes (ca 1857–1921) and appeared in *The British Journal of Photography* in August 1883. Barnes was a regular contributor to both journals, writing on the prosaic, practical aspects of running a photographic business. Barnes clearly did not enjoy post-mortem commissions. His article dwells on the trials and difficulties of the work, draws on his own personal experience, and suggests a way in which photographers could increase profits in this line of business. Two studio proprietors writing under their own names also made a contribution to the literature. A few paragraphs written by the London-based photographer Alfred Bool were published in 1878 in the *British Journal of Photography Almanac*.³ Joseph Hubert included a brief mention of post-mortem photography in a lecture delivered to the members of the London and Provincial Photographic Association.⁴ His paper subsequently acquired national exposure through publication in the pages of *The British Journal* in January 1887. It describes a visit to photograph the body of a little girl. This incident appeared in a paper with the provocative title 'Can Photography Lie?' Though brief and limited in number, these articles convey some idea of the way in which British photographers approached the practical aspects of post-mortem work, their

2—'The late George Mason Photographic Dealer of Glasgow', *The British Journal of Photography* (14 June 1901), 375.

3—Alfred Bool may be more familiar as the first photographer employed by the Society for Photographing Relics of Old London. Alfred and his son John produced work for the Society from 1875 to 1878.

4—Joseph Hubert FRPS had a studio in Hackney before transferring to Regent Street, London in 1899.

attitude towards commissions of this nature, the ends they were seeking to achieve in the photograph, and the purpose they thought such photographs served.

Extent of the Practice

Surviving examples confirm that post-mortem photography was practised in Britain from the 1840s and continues to this day. Some maternity hospitals now offer parents the choice of having photographs of a stillborn child or baby who dies soon after birth. However, it is difficult to estimate the extent of the practice in the nineteenth century, since post-mortem photographs are conspicuous by their scarcity. In the course of my research over many years, I have seen two to three hundred British post-mortem photographs, as compared with hundreds of thousands of conventional portraits of the living.⁵ I am not suggesting that this ratio provides any accurate reflection of the relative frequency of post-mortem commissions in this period. After all, we have little knowledge of the numbers that may be concealed within the privacy of the family archive. The question also arises of whether posthumous portraits were uncommonly susceptible to culling. Fundamental changes in social and cultural attitudes towards death, or even a profound difference in attitude among individuals in the same family, could have resulted in the destruction of higher than normal numbers of these portraits. Logic suggests that they were probably at their most vulnerable around the time of the death of the person who had originally commissioned and treasured them—though I have found no documented record of such elimination.⁶ Certainly the poverty of the surviving record presents difficulties for the historian, since generalisations are problematical when dealing with such a small sample. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that most surviving post-mortem portraits come to us divorced from their original context and devoid of any documentation or information that can shed light on their origins, purpose or subsequent fate.

However, evidence from one extant studio archive supports the proposition that post-mortem portraiture was a minority practice. The daybooks of Camille Silvy survive today in the photographic collections of the National Portrait Gallery.⁷ They cover the period August 1859–July 1868 (although one volume from July 1863 to May 1864 is missing). The number of commissions undertaken by the studio during this period totalled some 14,740. Of these, fewer than ten appear to be post-mortems. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing whether this minuscule proportion was typical since few other contemporary studio archives have survived.

The small number of articles in the British photographic press similarly suggests a readership unfamiliar with the topic. In 1881 one contributor described post-mortem work as ‘a class of subject to which most photographers are entire strangers’.⁸ This assertion, however, has to be weighed against Brangwin Barnes’s claim that ‘post-mortem cases come in the way of most photographers at some time or another’. Barnes infers that anybody in the business for any length of time was bound to get the occasional commission. Other writers go further and assert that photographers avoided this type of work as they found it distasteful. ‘Photographers in this country are unusually loath to undertake the production of portraits of deceased persons’.⁹ This claim was repeated in 1891, ‘photographing a corpse is an operation from which most shrink’.¹⁰ Barnes, however, claimed in 1883 that ‘some one or two firms in London derive no inconsiderable portion of their yearly income from this source alone’.¹¹ Does this suggest that individual photographers preferred to pass the work over to other firms? John Gihon’s reputation ‘for doing that class of work well’ won him ‘commissions received by others in the business, who

5– The author helped to establish the Documentary Photography Archive in Manchester. The DPA includes a special collection, the Archive of Family Photographs, which totals over 80,000 images. Her subsequent research, teaching and surgeries on the family album over a period of twenty-five years have exposed her to sufficient numbers of family photographs to justify this claim.

6– The original of Ada Browne’s portrait was discovered in a coal shaft during excavations for the foundations of a new swimming pool in Wigan. Does this suggest that somebody at some time wished to bury the image? Ada Browne’s portrait is discussed later.

7– Camille-Léon-Louis Silvy (1834–1910) moved to London in 1859 and took over the premises of Caldesi and Montecchi at 38 Porchester Terrace, Bayswater. He is thought to have helped introduce the carte-de-visite in London. His studio attracted the fashionable élite with customers and critics alike admiring the elegance of his portraits. His last portraits were taken in July 1868; the business was sold to Adolphe Beau, who specialised in portraits of actors and actresses.

8– Magnus Jackson, ‘Photography Outside the Studio’, *The Photographic News* (4 February 1881), 56–7.

9– ‘Photography in and out of the studio’, *The Photographic News* (10 July 1875), 325.

10– ‘Notes’, *The Photographic News* (24 April 1891), 321.

11– C. Brangwin Barnes, ‘Post Mortem Photography’, *The British Journal of Photography* (3 August 1883), 449–50.

