

Sarah Angelina Acland First Lady of Colour Photography

by Giles Hudson
Bodleian Library, 2012

Reviewed by Jan Garden Castro

Sarah “Angie” Acland’s (1849–1930) contributions to black-and-white and color photography are a little-known chapter in the history of photography. This monograph mentions the progressive attitudes toward women in Oxford, England, at the close of the nineteenth century, the other women then active in the field, and the many advances in photographic processes credited to Acland’s circle of acquaintances that occurred between the inventions of Louis Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot and the early stages of color photography.

The beautiful plates and Giles Hudson’s meticulously researched text make this both a collector’s item every library should own as well as a reminder that the early history of photography leaves out most women. Acland grew up in the most prominent circle of photography advocates in Oxford; as a child, in 1856, she was photographed by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) and others. An albumen print by Hill & Saunders (c. 1868) shows her as an invalid in the family drawing room on her nineteenth birthday. Hudson barely notes that Acland was a sickly child from age nine with a nervous condition in her legs and that sometimes she was in a wheelchair. Evidently, her condition improved around the time that her mother died in 1878. Despite health concerns, she participated in the arts and in the scientific inquiries of her day. In memoirs written late in her lifetime, Acland recalled an exchange around 1868 in their drawing room between Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79) and John Ruskin, a family friend whom Acland later photographed. Ruskin was upset by the staged photo of Sir John Herschel “in which his hair all stood up like a halo of fireworks,” and Cameron replied, “John Ruskin you are not

worthy of photographs” (9). Hudson does not tell us what Acland herself thought about this disagreement, only that she knew Cameron’s work well before she herself became known for photographing her eminent father and family friends, and for her contributions to color photography. Although Acland’s photographic style is less drama-tinged than Cameron’s, both took up photography later in life—Acland at age 42, in 1891, and Cameron at 48, and only for eleven years (1864–75).¹

Growing up in a household with seven brothers (one died at age 22 in Ceylon) and a dozen servants, Acland became known for her culture and learning; in later life, both experts and amateurs consulted her. Her physician father, Sir Henry Wentworth Acland, rose to influential university posts, including Regius Professor of Medicine and Curator of the University Galleries (now the Ashmolean Museum). In 1860, he created a new Oxford museum now called the University Museum of Natural History. In brief, Acland grew up surrounded by great thinkers in the arts and sciences. At age 15, she had already begun watercolor painting with her father, knew Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, and Holman Hunt, and began formal art lessons with William Riviere. She also became close with John Ruskin, who stayed with the Aclands while he was Slade Professor of Art at Oxford in 1869.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the latest advances in photography were being debated at Oxford by professors of chemistry, botany, and art, and Ruskin was using Daguerreotypes, calotypes, and albumen prints as teaching aids. Acland’s father gave her a Kodak #3 camera for her forty-second birthday, in 1891. By the following year, she had purchased a Watson half-plate ‘Acme’ camera, which used glass plates, and had created a much-praised photograph of Prime Minister William Gladstone. Among several photographs of Ruskin and her father, the 1893 lantern slide of John Ruskin and Henry W. Acland is notable not only for the three-quarter profile poses of two friends engaged in a

conversation but also for the range of tonalities and textures in her father’s tweed suit, the mens’ topcoats, shiny shoes, gray hair, and features as well as their outdoor setting—the leafy hedge behind them, Ruskin’s wicker chair, and the gravel at their feet. The portrait is intimate in mood, and the clarity of the varied details is remarkable. By 1893, Acland had won a photography medal.

By the 1890s, there were three camera clubs in Oxford; in 1894, the year of this self-portrait (Fig. 1), Acland was the first woman elected to join the Oxford Camera Club, and in 1899, she was elected a member of the Royal Photographic Society. She gave lantern slide lectures on photography at both clubs. Between 1898 and 1900, Acland began learning about Edward Sanger Shepherd’s Spectrum Plate color photography from James Cadett to the extent that she was soon busy writing and lecturing on its theory and practice. This time-consuming three-color process involved making orthochromatic plates using three filters; the multiple negatives then had to be combined into lantern slides. In passing, Hudson mentions a few better-known women photographers born during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, including Etheldreda Janet Laing (1872–1960), Lena Connell (1875–1949), and Clara Cooper (1877–1927).

Although Giles Hudson does not estimate the artist’s total photographic output, he relates that 750 monochrome photographs and 350 color plates presently “survive” and that

The significance of Miss Acland’s colour photography with the Sanger Shepherd process is difficult to overstate. Her slides made her a household name among photographers, created an appetite for colour in the lecture-going public, and remained a point of reference for years to come (41).

The book’s 220 photographs begin with 120 monochrome portraits and landscapes, most produced in actual sizes. Each is described in detail as well. In addition to important men in Oxford, Acland photographed everything from

one of her grey horses standing in profile to Miss Eleanor Smith, in 1895, a year before her death. Miss Smith looked after the Acland children, including Angie, and devoted her life to women's education and health care for the poor; her lace cap, wire-rimmed glasses, stout body sheathed in a knit shawl, and wry expression are loaded with character. A photo of Sir Henry Acland in his black doctoral gown (c. 1896) shows his stature and the wispy hair and furrowed brow. Mrs. Barney (c. 1897) is a half-plate negative of the widow of a chimney sweep; she experienced deep poverty but is shown with "great tenderness" in a close-up staring straight ahead; her dark hat and textured coat frame her slightly-shadowed face and gray hair. *Muckle's Hut, Boars Hill* (1899) shows the very old, light-hued dwelling with a steeply pitched roof which the Aclands rented to escape the social whirl in Oxford. The house is surrounded by dark trees, including one whose trunk leans southward, a thatched hut, and, in the foreground, fields of grass. Plate 107, *Trooper Sidney Peel* (1900), shows the grandson of former Prime Minister Robert Peel as a slightly slouching man with a large mustache in a uniform after his return from the Boer War in South Africa. The details in this photo are in sharp focus, including the shiny rifle in his lap and the slight shadow from the round of ammunition slung over his shoulder. In 1903 the artist photographed two eagle-owl chicks, and in 1921 she captured an eclipse of the sun and moon.

The death of her father in 1900 disrupted her life and required Acland to move to her own residence. In general, the monochrome portraits of Oxford and its citizens seem more historically significant to me than the color work from 1901–1919. For the color plates, Acland used a range of cameras and processes, including the Sanger Shepherd three-color separation process, Autochrome, Omnicolor, Dufay Dioptrichrome, and Paget Colour plates. In general, these are perfect compositions with remarkably vivid color and "house beautiful" subjects, such as a 1900 print from a three-color

separation negative called *Crimson Rambler in New College Gardens*—a view of roses climbing a metal gate at the garden entrance. Some images are exotic, such as two 1903 photos taken in Gibraltar's Mount Garden of Conda the Moor. *A Market Woman* (c. 1910) is an Autochrome portrait of a colorfully dressed woman with a basket on her arm against a light-hued wall; flowers cascade over the wall as it recedes into the distance. The woman's shadow and the receding wall form a V framing the woman. Some photos show aging, youth, gardens, and still lifes. The vista in *Reids Palace Hotel* (1908) is extraordinary for its depth, for the Cézannesque geometries of the fields in the foreground, for the tiny buildings on a hill overlooking sea and sky, and for its overall composition.

Giles Hudson offers only a little evidence about Acland's scientific accomplishments. Even though she was in the vanguard of color photography around 1902–03, her

colour photography has largely been ignored by historians, the Sanger Shepherd process faring little better. In the orthodox account of the history of photography the birth of colour is said to have taken place at the Photo-Club de Paris on 10 June 1907, credit for the first commercially successful colour process going not to Sanger Shepherd but to Auguste and Louis Lumière, for their Autochrome process. This is clearly incorrect. The first practicable system of colour photography was an English rather than a French achievement... (35).

Acland's remarkable depth of field, clarity, hues, and framing of images all suggest an exacting attention to a number of aesthetic choices and scientific processes. Her photographs demonstrate that showing character in one's photos is also an art.

Even with this beautiful book, Acland's full body of work is largely



Fig. 1. Sarah Angelina Acland, "The Operator" (Oct. 1894), half-plate negative. Bodleian Library, Minn negative 201/8.

unknown. I happen to know about the unknown Britton sisters, two prolific St. Louis photographers who took thousands of photographs in the U.S. and in Europe after World War I. No doubt, there are many unknown women in the history of photography. •

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Notes

1. Julia Margaret Cameron's work gained wider exposure when the Hogarth Press published her photographs in 1926 with her great-niece, Virginia Woolf, writing the introduction. The Metropolitan Museum of Art is exhibiting Cameron's work from August 19, 2013 through January 5, 2014.

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