

Hannah, Charlotte...and Julia

Colin Ford recounts the story revealed by two recent identifications which link the Rothschild family to one of the most significant names in the early history of photography



Hannah de Rothschild, a newly discovered portrait by Julia Margaret Cameron, 1871

Photography and the Victorian age were born together. The invention of photography and the coronation of the young queen happened within six months of each other. Before her reign was half way through, those who could afford it were assiduous collectors of the new art/science – and sometimes practitioners. The picture opposite shows some of the photographs collected by Hannah Rothschild (1851-90) hanging among other pictures on the walls of her studio at Mentmore, her home in Buckinghamshire. The other illustrations on these pages come from an album in The Rothschild Archive once owned – and probably compiled – by her aunt Charlotte (1819-84), the artistically inclined wife of Baron Lionel de Rothschild.

The picture of Hannah's studio is one of two by an unknown photographer in an 1871 album of architectural photographs of Mentmore (built soon after she was born, the house became hers after her father and mother died in 1874 and 1877 respectively). The album is now at Dalmeny House, outside Edinburgh, which became Hannah's home after she married Archibald Primrose, Lord Rosebery. Like many ladies of the time, Hannah was an accomplished artist, and the work on the easel and in the print frame may well be her own. If it is intriguing to try and work out her taste from the prints she chose to hang on the walls, it was the half a dozen photographs by the great Victorian Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-79) that interested me most, as a photographic historian.

Julia Margaret Pattle – her maiden name – was one of seven daughters of a family which had been part of the English presence in India for a century or more. Born in 1815 in Calcutta, she married Charles Hay Cameron, a distinguished lawyer and senior administrator in India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1838. They returned to Britain ten years later and spent some years in London, where they became friendly with Alfred Tennyson and his now-forgotten rival for the post of Poet Laureate, Sir Henry Taylor. Then they bought a house in Freshwater, on the Isle of Wight, next door to 'Farringford', where the Tennysons had settled down. The Camerons called their new home 'Dimbola Lodge', after one of their coffee plantations in Ceylon.

It was on one of Charles's visits to his coffee plantations in 1863-4 that the Camerons' eldest daughter and her husband gave Julia a camera; 'It may amuse you, Mother, to try to photograph during your solitude at Freshwater'. It was the beginning of thirteen years of extraordinary creativity, which produced some of the most powerful portraits of the nineteenth century, in any medium, as well as a very considerable number of pioneering and dramatic illustrations of literature and the Bible.



Hannah de Rothschild's studio, Mentmore 1871. From an album of architectural studies of Mentmore House. The recognisable photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron are of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (top centre), Julia Jackson (top left and one from bottom on right), *Friar Laurence and Juliet* (third from right, second row down) and an unknown subject (second from left, second row down). (By kind permission of the Earl and Countess of Rosebery)

The photographic process of the time was difficult, dirty and dangerous, requiring photographers to mix a dozen or so different chemicals, one of which was collodion, otherwise known as gun cotton. The resulting syrupy liquid had to be spread as evenly as possible over a large glass plate (Cameron's were at first 11" x 9" – later increased to a mammoth 15" x 12"), put in a camera, and exposed while still wet. Further chemical formulae were mixed to develop the negative, and to make and fix the print. According to Cameron, each photograph used no less than 'nine cans of fresh water from the well', and her cumbersome wooden camera needed two men to carry it. None of this would have come naturally to someone who, like most women of her class, employed servants to do the household tasks. Though it seems probable that she had experimented with other people's cameras and in their darkrooms before she possessed her own, there is no reference to this in her autobiographical notes – or in other sources. All we know about her introduction to the medium is that she told her friend Sir John Herschel: 'I have had one lesson from the great Amateur Photographer Mr Wynfield and I consult him (in correspondence) whenever I am in a difficulty'.

David Wilkie Wynfield was one of the founders of the St. John's Wood Clique of painters and, a year or two before Cameron took up photography, he made a series of photographs of his fellow artists in fancy dress. These share many of the qualities for which we prize Cameron's work – extreme close-up, removal of extraneous detail so as to concentrate on the face, and enthusiasm for the profile. But the pupil totally surpassed her teacher in her control of light. Though I cannot be sure, one of the photographs on Hannah de Rothschild's wall looks as if it might well be by Wynfield. It hangs close to Cameron's supreme profile portrait of her niece Julia Jackson (whose children were to include the publisher Gerald Duckworth and the Bloomsburyites Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell). This profile is a clear illustration of how, having converted an old glazed chicken shed into the sort of 'glasshouse' photographic studio in common use, Cameron often covered all the windows except one, allowing light to shine in from one direction only. The results were extremely dramatic and powerful, often showing only the sitter's head and shoulders, against a totally dark background.

The new portraitist was well placed to find distinguished sitters for her camera. Her six sisters had all married well and one, Sara – who, with her husband Henry Thoby Prinsep, had returned to London from India before the Camerons – established a fashionable salon at Little Holland House, where she surrounded herself with a coterie of painters (notably George Frederic Watts, who lived there for thirty years) musicians, scientists, and politicians. Here, Cameron met many of the celebrities of the day who would soon become subjects of her portraits. Later, when the Tennysons and Camerons were established on the Isle of Wight, Freshwater became a place of pilgrimage for many of these cultural figures and the guest list at Dimbola and Farringford reads almost like a Victorian Who's Who – from Darwin to Garibaldi, from Carlyle to Joachim, from Browning to Trollope.

I do not know how well the Rothschilds and their daughter knew Little Holland House, though they surely did so. They were related by marriage to one frequent visitor – Sir Coutts Lindsay, painter and later owner of the influential Grosvenor Gallery (his wife, Blanche, was Hannah's cousin and Charlotte's niece). He had, at one stage, been dangerously intimate with another of Julia's sisters, Virginia, Lady

Somers. He and Blanche were regular visitors to Mentmore, to Charlotte's houses and even to New Court, headquarters of the Rothschild bank. The Rothschilds certainly knew Tennyson and Thackeray. The latter's daughter Anne (see p.36) for instance, wrote to her publisher in 1868: 'In April, 1869, my mother travelled to Rome with Lady de Rothschild and her daughters, to stay with the Storys'. Five years later, Tennyson's wife Emily recorded in her diary, on the occasion of the visit to England of the Shah of Persia: 'A. [i.e. Alfred Tennyson] has invitations from Aunt Franklin, Baroness Rothschild & the Goschens who have heard that he would like to see the Shah'. G F Watts painted Hannah in 1875, and the painter's second wife M. S. Watts, who catalogued all his works and wrote a somewhat anodyne biography of him after his death, believed it 'may be classed as one of Mr. Watts's finest examples of women's portraits ... It gave such pleasure to her husband, that after Lady Rosebery's too early death, Lord Rosebery told him that since her loss it was carried when and where ever he moved; as he could not submit to be parted from it'.

Cameron's portrait of Hannah in Charlotte's album is previously unknown, and was taken on a visit to the Isle of Wight in the autumn of 1871. At the time, Charlotte wrote to her daughter, Leonora, referring to Virginia's 'non-fair sister, the photographing Mrs. Cameron', and telling her that Hannah had 'spent a day with the lady at Freshwater, and, I believe, was amused'. The dress Hannah is wearing was possibly not her own. Cameron often dressed her female models in loose draped dresses and this rather mediaeval – not to say pre-Raphaelite – example, or ones very similar, can be seen in many of her biblical, classical and literary illustrations.

Charlotte's album contains five more Cameron prints, as well as a series of photographs taken at Gunnersbury by the well-known art photographer Oscar Gustave Rejlander, and a portrait of the biologist – and first editor of *The Photographic Journal* – Arthur Hefrey. The Camerons are all illustrated on these pages. Of Tennyson, one of the most painted, drawn and photographed men of the age, no less than seventeen of her portraits survive. He did not enjoy the experience, having to be cajoled – or bullied – to visit her 'little dark room – half-reluctant, half-willing to take part in this shadowy presentment, but wholly interested in his old friend's success'. Cameron never flattered him, and so perhaps tells us more about

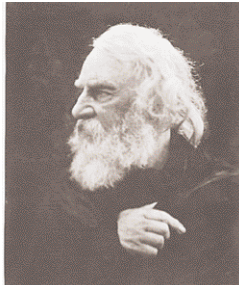


Left: 'The Kiss of Peace', 1869, by Julia Margaret Cameron. The models are Mary Ann Hillier, a Cameron maidservant, and Kate Keown, daughter of a master gunner at the Royal Artillery's Freshwater Redoubt
Right: 'A Study of the Beatrice Cenci', 1866, by Julia Margaret Cameron. The model is Mary Emily 'May' Prinsep, a Cameron relative who, after her first husband died, married the second Lord Tennyson

the real Tennyson than any of his other painted and photographed portraits. ‘When I have had such men before my Camera’, she wrote, ‘my whole soul has endeavored to do its duty towards them in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man’.

‘The Kiss of Peace’ was one of Julia’s own favourites. Shortly before her death, she gave a print to her youngest son, with the inscription: ‘Dearest Charlie, I give you this Prize Copy of the most beautiful of all my photographs. This is a very splendid print so like a sepia painting that it is difficult to believe that it is genuine untouched Photograph’.

As we know from the inscription on Charlotte’s print of ‘The Kiss of Peace’, it was given to her by the photographer. So, perhaps, were the other prints in the album and on the wall of Hannah’s studio. Cameron could not resist giving free prints to artists and others who might help to forward her career, and she would certainly have included Charlotte and Hannah among that number. But perhaps they also purchased some prints (which would have cost between ten shillings and one guinea each). The Camerons were always rather hard up, increasingly so as the Ceylon coffee crop became less and less reliable – ultimately being so ravaged by disease that the island’s estate owners replaced it by today’s staple, tea. Julia was constantly trying to make money from her photography, exhibiting her work at commercial dealers, and arranging to have carbon (permanent) copies of her best images marketed by the Autotype Company.



On Hannah’s wall can be seen two Cameron portraits of Julia Jackson – the niece whom she photographed more than any other woman – and one of Tennyson’s American friend and rival, Longfellow, author of *Hiawatha*. There is also an example of one of Cameron’s literary illustrations, a version of Shakespeare’s *Friar Laurence and Juliet*. Friar Laurence, with flowing locks and luxuriant beard, is Sir Henry Taylor, the Juliet the much-photographed maid Mary Ann Hillier. In another version of this picture, Mary wears a dress that could well be the one in which Hannah Rothschild was photographed. There is one photograph, almost in the centre of the complete picture, which I have been unable to identify, though it is certainly similar to one of the over 1200 images by Cameron I have seen. But perhaps it is unique?

Finding the prints illustrated on these pages has been typical of the rewarding hunt for photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron which I began twenty-five years ago. Over the last five years, I have been joined by colleagues in Los Angeles (at the J Paul Getty Museum) and Bradford (the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television). The result is that the Getty will publish a catalogue raisonné of Cameron’s work at the beginning of next year (astonishingly, the first ever catalogue raisonné of a photographer). It would be happy to end this detective story with the news that we had discovered the prints which used to be in Hannah’s studio. Unfortunately, that has not happened – but the search goes on!

From top: ‘Miss Thackeray’ (Anne, elder daughter of William Thackeray), 1867, ‘Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Esq.’, 1868, ‘Alfred Tennyson Esq.’, 1869 by Julia Margaret Cameron

Colin Ford, CBE was the founding Head of the National Museum of Photography, Film & Television and Director of the National Museums & Galleries of Wales. He is curator of an exhibition of Julia Margaret Cameron’s work opening at the National Portrait Gallery, London, in February 2003, and author of the accompanying book. The exhibition will tour to Bradford and Los Angeles later in the year.