

George Washington Wilson. The Formative Years

George Washington Wilson. Los años de formación

Dr Peter Blair

Collector and photo historian, Scotland

ABSTRACT

In 1861, Aberdeen photographer George Washington Wilson was regarded as pre-eminent among stereo-photographers and the benchmark by which others were measured. His reputation was established in the late 1850s through a remarkable combination of inventiveness, artistic vision and photographic skill, coupled with an aptitude at self-promotion. Much of his early formative work is difficult to identify, as it does not appear in any catalogue. Rare stereoscopic images from the author's collection are used to illustrate an important article on Wilson from *Photographic Notes* in November 1858 for the first time. Analysing contemporary reports provides the context to understand Wilson's rise to prominence.

Keywords: George Washington Wilson, Aberdeen, stereoscopy, photography, Brewster.

RESUMEN

En 1861, el fotógrafo de Aberdeen, George Washington Wilson, fue considerado preeminente entre los estereo-fotógrafos y el punto de referencia por el cual se midieron otros. Su reputación se estableció a fines de la década de 1850 a través de una notable combinación de inventiva, visión artística y habilidad fotográfica, junto con una aptitud para la autopromoción. Gran parte de su trabajo formativo temprano es difícil de identificar, ya que no aparece en ningún catálogo. Raras imágenes estereoscópicas de la colección del autor se utilizan para ilustrar un importante artículo sobre Wilson en *Photographic Notes* en noviembre de 1858 por primera vez. El análisis de informes contemporáneos proporciona el contexto para comprender el ascenso de Wilson a la fama.

Palabras clave: George Washington Wilson, Aberdeen, estereoscopia, fotografía, Brewster.

As a collector of George Washington Wilson stereoviews, it has always fascinated me how a portrait painter from a small, provincial city in the north-east of Scotland emerged as one of the foremost stereo-photographers in the UK and the benchmark by which others were measured. In the process, he established one of Victorian Britain's largest photographic enterprises.

G. W. Wilson was an early adopter of stereoscopy. At Aberdeen's very first photographic exhibition, held in late 1853 at the Mechanics' Institution, Wilson & Hay won a bronze medal for



FIG. 1. James Cassie RSA, stereo-ambrotype, Wilson & Hay, 1853/54.

a portrait and a silver medal for the overall quality of their photographs, which included a stereoscopic portrait. This is the first record¹ of stereoviews being exhibited publicly since the London Great Exhibition of 1851, where Sir David Brewster's lenticular stereoscope was launched. The short-lived Wilson & Hay partnership only lasted from September 1853 through to January 1855². At this early date, the vast majority of stereoviews in the UK were portraits. Only one Wilson & Hay stereoview (see Figure 1) has been so far identified³. This is an ambrotype portrait of James Cassie RSA, a local Aberdeen artist. Cassie had been lame since childhood, hence the walking stick. It should also be noted that Wilson's wife was Maria Cassie. Research to establish a family link has not yet been fruitful. The small Wilson & Hay label highlights the medals awarded at the 1853 Aberdeen exhibition (FIG. 1).

Topographical stereoviews were taken of Paris at least as early as 1852 by Claude-Marie Ferrier, working for Dubosq, who had commercialised Brewster's stereoscope. In 1854, George Nottage founded the London Stereoscope (later Stereoscopic) Company, selling a huge range of views from various photographers. As the popularity of stereoscopy surged and commercial opportunities increased, Wilson was encouraged to venture out of his studio with his stereo-camera. In 1855, accompanied by his friend George Walker, he took images of the Old Mill at Cults, near Aberdeen. He was surprised when Walker ordered a large quantity and sold them in his bookshop for 2 shillings (10p) each⁴. This opened Wilson's eyes to the potential for scenic stereoviews and by 1856 he had a catalogue of 44 regional views. Compared with his later work, most were of limited artistic and stereoscopic value, however, several (see Figure 2 for a typical example) demonstrated a highly promising eye for composition (FIG. 2).

1 Photographic Exhibitions in Britain, 1839 – 1865, <http://peib.dmu.ac.uk/>

2 Roger Taylor, «George Washington Wilson – Artist and Photographer (1823 – 93)», London Stereoscopic Company, 2018.

3 Peter Blair, «Scotland in 3D – A Victorian Virtual Reality Tour», P3DB Publications, 2018, ISBN 9781527225527.

4 Roger Taylor, «George Washington Wilson – Artist and Photographer (1823 – 93)», London Stereoscopic Company, 2018, ISBN 978095744692.



FIG. 2. 34 – Firs in Ballochbuie Forest, Wilson, 1856 Series.

A mere five years later, Wilson had firmly established himself as the UK's benchmark stereophotographer. In 1861, *Photographic Notes* reported that Wilson «has now achieved for himself a position which no other photographer has reached»⁵, while in the *British Journal of Photography*, Roger Fenton, today regarded as a peerless early Victorian photographer, suffered the ignominy of his submissions to the 1861 annual London Photographic Society's Exhibition being damned with the faint praise that they were «somewhat in the style of Mr Wilson's»⁶.

It is Wilson's work from 1858 and 1859 which established his reputation. He became very interactive, sending work for press review and to exhibition. He experimented with technique, chemistry and apparatus. The images from this period were highly innovative for their time, including views taken directly into the sun (an unthinkable heresy) and what were perhaps the first instantaneous street scenes. Reviewers were eulogistic.

Much of this body of work is difficult to identify, as it does not appear in any catalogue. The images tend to be on white, cream or pale yellow card and have hand-written titles with no attribution to Wilson. The only means of identification are either stylistically, by reference to contemporary journal reviews and exhibition reports, or by tentative hand-writing analysis⁷. The photographic journals of the day sadly did not have any photographs in them. However, I have been able to identify many of the stereoviews mentioned in early articles on Wilson. Reproduced here is one of the most significant articles on Wilson⁸, published in *Photographic Notes*, November 1858, now coupled with accompanying photographs for the first time.

5 *Photographic Notes*, 15 Jan 1861, p. 20.

6 *British Journal of Photography*, Jan 1861, p. 37.

7 Peter Blair, «George Washington Wilson – Stereoviews – A Collector's Catalogue», print-on-demand, www.lulu.com.

8 *Photographic Notes*, Nov 1858, p. 252.

Photographic Notes (Journal of the Birmingham Photographic Society), edited by Thomas Sutton (Volume III, November 1858)

We have received from Mr. George Wilson, of No. 24, Crown Street, Aberdeen, the well-known photographer, a series of the most charming stereoscopic views upon paper that we have yet seen. In many of these photographs Mr. Wilson has succeeded in introducing the natural sky, the instantaneous ripple upon the surface of water, animated figures, and at the same time rendering all the details of the objects in shadow. This has not been done by any trick in the printing, nor have the negatives been retouched; the result is due to legitimate photography. Among the most remarkable of the subjects sent are the following: Oban, Sunset; a Summer Morning on the Sands; Fishing Boats on Loch Fyne, at Inverary; Oban, Evening; Inverary, Argyleshire; and the instantaneous portrait of a Child, seated upon a rocking-horse, and with a merry smile upon his countenance. These subjects are so exceedingly fine, and so far in advance of what one usually sees, that they require especial notice (FIG. 3).



FIG. 3. Instantaneous portrait of a child, seated on a rocking horse, Wilson, 1858.

«Oban, Sunset.» — In this view the artist has pointed his camera directly at the sun's disc. The sun is just about to disappear behind a heavy bank of clouds, the edges of which are tipped with light. These rest upon a long range of distant hills, between which and the foreground is a broad sheet of water covered with ripples. On this water, immediately beneath the sun, is a bar of dancing light, not snowy, but just one shade lighter than the rest of the water; a steamer is crossing it and leaving behind her two long lines of wake from the rudder and paddles. The foreground consists of a row of housetops with quite enough of detail in the shadows. This picture, although evidently taken instantaneously, is sharp all over, and the manipulation clean and even. No diffused light has entered the camera, for Mr. Wilson informs us that the tubes of his lenses are lined with black velvet, the edges of the lenses blackened, and a shade in front also lined with black velvet. Such an instrument is not to be purchased ready-made, and the reader will observe that the first professional photographers, who aim at something beyond the imperfect things that have been done in the infancy of the art, and in their daring attempts venture even to point the camera at the sun himself, are compelled to modify entirely the mounting of their lenses, and the plan of their camera. The cameras and lenses commonly made and sold are unfit for anything beyond the most elementary applications of the art, and indeed scarcely fit for them. We beg of the reader to note these things. The photographic lens and camera commonly sold by opticians are very incomplete, and the cause of innumerable failures, which are erroneously attributed to the chemicals being out of order. One remarkable feature of this picture is the halo round the sun. This we are informed was produced by some defect in the lenses (FIG. 4).



FIG. 4. Oban, Sunset, Wilson, 1858.

«Oban, Evening.» — This subject is similar to the last in composition, but the sun was too high to be included in the picture, and a steamer, with smoke rising from the funnel, lies directly across a broad bar of reflected sunshine upon the water. The ripple is sharply indicated, the distance well thrown back into haze, and the foreground fully out in all its details (FIG. 5).



FIG. 5. Oban, Evening, Wilson, 1858.

«A Summer Morning on the Sands» — It combines clouds, ships, breaking waves, and a wet beach. It is a delicious little photograph (FIG. 6).



FIG. 6. A Summer Morning on the Sands, Wilson, 1858.

«Fishing Boats on Loch Fyne.» — In this picture figures are introduced, and the shadows of objects are thrown towards the spectator (FIG. 7).



FIG. 7. Fishing Boats, Loch Fyne, Inverary.

«Inverary, Argyleshire,» — It is another marvellous subject, in which clouds, reflections in water, animated figures, and detail in the shadows, are all rendered in perfect truthfulness to nature. There are no chalky whites, nor black unmeaning patches of shadow (FIG. 8).

In addition to the above subjects we received several very fine ones of less pretensions to novelty, but equal in their way to anything that has been done in photography. The best are perhaps Fingal's Cave, Staffa, three subjects; Bonnington Falls on the Clyde; Waterfall at Inversnaid; and Loch Etive, a subject which has extraordinary merit as a composition.



FIG. 8. Inverary, Argyllshire, Wilson, 1858.

Growing recognition encouraged Wilson, from around 1859 onwards, to create an entirely new catalogue of stereoviews on distinctive bright yellow card, typically with large blue labels announcing G. W. Wilson as the photographer. The earliest known «main series» catalogue is dated 1863 and contains views up to number 440A. A few of the 1858 views made it into the new catalogue, for example the views of Staffa became numbered 15, 16 and 17 respectively. However, they were rapidly updated with improved images from similar vantage points. Wilson probably revisited Staffa in 1859, 1860 and 1866.

Wilson continued to add around 80 to 100 new images per year and constantly updated his back catalogue with fresh versions, retaining the original catalogue numbers. When the last known Wilson stereoview catalogue was published in 1893 it contained images numbered up to 2556⁹.

It is a great pleasure to come and talk at a Stereoscopic Conference because I believe it is a field of photography that has been sadly ignored and reduced to a mere footnote in the history of photography. However, it was the dominant form of photography around 1860. It fundamentally changed the business model for photography, it drove developments in photographic technique and aesthetics and it accelerated the development of camera technology. As he pushed against the boundaries of photography, George Washington Wilson was pivotal to all of these developments.

It is the short period in the late 1850s that established Wilson's reputation and provided the platform for commercial success. Back in 1861 he was pre-eminent among stereo-photographers in Britain. Today he is sadly overlooked. Some might argue that commercial success diluted the artistic vision. The novelty and inventiveness of Wilson's early masterpieces are certainly underappreciated, probably largely because they are stereoscopic, therefore small and difficult to exhibit. It is only by understanding the state of the art in 1858 and realising the importance of stereoscopy as the best-selling photographic format of the period that we can

9 Peter Blair, «George Washington Wilson – Stereoviews – A Collector's Catalogue», print-on-demand, www.lulu.com.

begin to appreciate why Wilson was so highly rated in his day. The opinion of his peers provides a crucial insight. Fellow photographer, Valentine Blanchard, reminisced in 1862, «(Wilson has taken) the greatest number of really beautiful pictures that have yet been secured by photography. The boldness of the idea which prompted him to turn the daring gaze of his lens at the sun – and coming suddenly, too, upon our old notions about the necessity of keeping the sun out of the lens – almost took my breath away»¹⁰.

References

BLAIR, Peter (2018): *Scotland in 3D – A Victorian Virtual Reality Tour*, P3DB Publications.

- *George Washington Wilson – Stereoviews – A Collector's Catalogue*, print-on-demand, www.lulu.com.

British Journal of Photography, Jan 1861.

Photographic Exhibitions in Britain, 1839 – 1865, <http://peib.dmu.ac.uk/>

Photographic Notes, 15 Jan 1861 and Nov 1858.

TAYLOR, Roger (2018): *George Washington Wilson. Artist and Photographer (1823 – 93)*, London, Stereoscopic Company.

The Photographic News, 19 December 1862.

¹⁰ *The Photographic News*, 19 December 1862, p. 602.