NIGEL LENDON Ashton, Roberts and
Bayliss: Some Relationships between
Illustration, Painting and Photography in
the Late Nineteenth Century

At first glance this famous painting (*Shearing the Rams*) appears to be almost photographic. Yet in spite of the artist's concentration on detail, the carefully studied portrait heads and the meticulous drawing of the interior, the picture hangs together extremely well.[1]
— Robert Campbell, *The Paintings of Tom Roberts*, 1962

The traditional assumption of a hierarchy of forms—where the superiority of painting over all other forms of visual imagery is taken for granted—is reflected in the quotation above, and is implicit in most writing on the relationship between painting and photography. The task of this paper is to find a critical method whereby this relationship can be re-evaluated in the light of material factors in the various productive processes, which are not taken into account in the orthodox approach to the subject.[2]

A common problem which is characteristic of an orthodox method of analysis emerges when the 'effects' of the invention of photography are considered within a given and persisting framework of forms, conventions and styles. While one would expect that the intervention of a new form like photography would have inevitably caused some disruption to established assumptions, values and modes of practice, it must be remembered that painters and photographers were themselves subject to the inhibiting influence of the contemporaneous orthodoxies (beliefs about the superiority of painting). Hence the persistence of the problem. It is a constant factor in the various debates on the interaction between painting and photography that a hierarchical viewpoint tends to act as a self-validating mechanism for dominant interests and values, disguised in a 'logic' of formal consistency.

I

In the second half of the nineteenth century there occurred an extraordinary penetration of photographs (and photographically derived images) into the lives of people whose social and economic status had previously restricted their access to visual forms of communication. This coincided with a marked increase in the proportion of the population living in urban centres, and a rise in literacy associated with the growth of the middle classes.

The invention of photography resulted in the virtual demise of certain forms (e.g., miniature portraiture), and in modified modes of practice of others (e.g., naturalistic painting). Even more significantly, the invention of photography and the development of photo-mechanical processes of reproduction made possible the development of the forms of 'mass culture' by which our lives are ordered today.

To a large extent, it was the much-vaunted 'objectivity' of the photographically derived

illustration which helped to establish the form of the late-nineteenth century popular press, which was to emerge in the early twentieth century (in conjunction with the organization of mass production and patterns of mass consumption) as the 'mass media'. Yet this 'authority of the camera', as perceived by the audience of the popular press, is not some abstraction of a scientific understanding of the technology.[3] It derives from a much simpler process of verification, the photographic portrait. All but the most impoverished sections of society could now afford to commission and possess an image of themselves in the form of a photograph. In 1847 half a million daguerreotype plates were sold in Paris, and by 1862 it is estimated that in Great Britain more than one hundred million photographs were produced annually.[4] The great majority of these photographs were portraits. Would a member of the audience addressed by the print media be willing to 'believe' in, say, the might of the British Empire, on the basis of Roger Fenton's photographs of the Crimean War, if the 'objectivity' of the photographic process had not already been confirmed by the making of his *own* photographic portrait? Illustrations in the press, or naturalistic paintings, became more or less credible, or powerful, according to the degree to which they were seen to approximate 'photographic' reality. It was through the establishment of this complex relationship between the forms of representation and their social application (and reception) that photography caused a fundamental disruption to the traditional hierarchical understanding of the visual arts.

What, then, are the bases for the continuing controversies surrounding the relationship between photography and painting? How might a methodology be developed which adequately accounts for the dynamic interrelationship of the forms of visual representation since the mid-nineteenth century?

We need to consider these questions from two angles: we need to account for *both* the 'aesthetic' *and* the material consequences of the invention and development of photography in relation to the practices of production of all forms of visual imagery. The 'aesthetic' approach is the raw material of orthodox photographic criticism, which has produced its own body of literature.[5] The primary purpose of this paper is to explore the *connections* between aesthetic and material considerations in circumstances where we have become accustomed to their *separation* as the norm in the literature of photography.

In formal terms the development of photography through its early stages can be seen to have exerted an influence on painters in a number of ways, both through a conscious use of the new medium and (unconsciously) through conventions derived from its use in other forms of visual representation. In the former, photography was used by painters as a substitute for sketching, as an *aide mémoire* to assist with the depiction of precise details or topography. Early instances of painters' use of the camera in Europe (both in the photographic process and its antecedent, the *camera obscura*) are numerous and well documented.[6] Its use in this sense might be seen to extend from the study of form *per se* to the early photographic studies of form *in motion* which were of intense interest as much to painters of an academic following as they were to the Impressionists.[7]

In Australia it seems likely that the first artist to make use of the camera was S. T. Gill, who in 1845 imported the first daguerreotype apparatus to Adelaide.[8] Both Conrad Martens and C. W. Piguenit made early use of the camera as an integral part of their practice as painters.[9]

The consequences of the use of the camera on the prevailing conventions of pictorial composition are more complex: consciously used, the frame of the photographic image and the spatial distortions induced by contemporaneous lenses resulted in outstanding innovations, as well as some extremely uncomfortable attempts to interpret these new conventions.[10] Unconsciously perhaps, the attention given to 'the frame' may have re-

sulted from its coincidence with the typographical requirements of book and magazine illustration.

Aaron Scharf makes the further point that the various means of photographic production encouraged an emphasis on tonal rather than linear structure in drawing and painting; similarly, he investigates the attention given by artists to the blurred figures of early instantaneous photography, or the indistinct forms of foliage on a windy day. Such aspects coincided with a scientific interest on the part of some painters in the properties of light and the perception of colour.[11]

On another level, there occurred a kind of inversion (or 'reversion', if understood in relation to the innovations which derived from photography) when the 'standards' of painting assert their hierarchical authority over the modes of practice of those photographers whose aspirations were to join the ranks of the Fine Arts.

The strength of this concurrence with the prevailing taste in the criticism of painting can be seen by comparing the precision and detail of British photography with the soft focus and atmospheric effects of its French equivalents.[12] The aspirations of most professional photographers towards their 'proper' place in the hierarchy of the Fine Arts can be seen in the subjects which they chose to exhibit in the Intercolonial and International exhibitions of the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s. Their search for the exotic or the picturesque scene reflected the dominant aesthetic interests of their European counterparts.[13]

Given the above, to what extent it is meaningful to refer to a painting like *Shearing the Rams* as 'almost photographic'? Any contextual examination of the relation between photography and painting reveals that at least *some* of the interrelationships would have been familiar to any realist or naturalist painter in the late nineteenth century. We can safely assume that such artists would have been well aware of the aesthetic controversy, irrespective of whether their work implied a relationship of a more utilitarian nature. From the remarks of Charles Conder in 1891 in a letter to Tom Roberts (when he was working on *The Breakaway*), we can see that the use of photography was for these painters *anything but* controversial:

The difficulties of sheep in motion must be tremendous and need a deuce of a lot of study and memory (wouldn't photographs help you somewhat? That's the way the sheep and cattle painters work here, they say, but after all they show it a bit too much after). However, it doesn't matter too much how it's done does it? So long as you get what's wanted.[14]

That the sheep and cattle painters of Europe 'show it a bit too much after' hardly compares with the nature of the debate of earlier years. Of Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1849), the critic Étienne-Jean Delécluze wrote:

In the picture, which might easily be taken for a badly developed daguerreotype, there is the natural crudity which is always the result of taking Nature at first hand . . . In spite of the gross defects which spoil M. Courbet's huge picture, there are certain very solid qualities in it, and parts of it are too well painted for anyone to believe in the ignorance and rawness affected by this artist.[15]

With regard to naturalistic painting, the use of the term 'photographic' as a derogatory epithet (rather than an objective description) emerges in criticism of turn-of-the-century Salon and Royal Academy painting. An indication of how this was received by painters of the Heidelberg school can be deduced from McCubbin's reading of an essay by Walter Sickert on the work of Bastien-Lepage:

Sickert writes about Lepage in a spirit of detraction, saying that he was no artist at all but only a clever workman, whose main object in life was to produce a big photograph. Entering for the Salon every year, he never got beyond slavish copying of the model, and had no sense of movement in his work . . . For myself I think Sickert is a fool; he is incapable of any catholicity of judgement.[16]

Continuing references to 'photographic' realism must, therefore, be located in relation to the state of the controversies of the time. Campbell, quoted at the beginning of this paper, characteristically fails on another score: *Shearing the Rams*, in both the academic character of its composition and in the way it is painted, is demonstrably *non*-photographic.[17]

We must also consider, however, a question which may be particularly relevant to Tom Roberts, given the variety of means by which he sought to achieve the naturalism he desired. To what extent were painters, while consciously making use of photography as an aid to their paintings, subject unconsciously to the indirect influences of the invention and development of photography? While painters may have taken advantage of the controversies surrounding 'photographic' naturalism or realism, they were themselves subject, at the same time, to the ideological role of photography in the form of the illustrated popular press.

To follow this line of speculation beyond the realm of aesthetic controversy it is necessary to make a comparative study of the practices of the professional photographer at the time when real competition (in an economic sense) existed between the photographer and the painter/illustrator.

II

On 26 June 1880 the news reached Melbourne that the Kelly gang had killed the informer, Aaron Sherritt, near Beechworth in north-eastern Victoria. Immediately a train with a small detachment of police and trackers was despatched to the scene, and four 'representatives of the Press' were invited to accompany them. The journey there was newsworthy in itself, and was reported in the most minute detail by those aboard. Travelling at high speed in the early hours of the morning, the train first survived crashing through a gate across the track, damaging its braking system. Later, near Glenrowan, with the news that the track had been torn up by the Kellys, the train was forced to proceed at walking pace, its passengers in constant fear of ambush.

On arrival at Glenrowan, the police found that the gang had retired to the hotel, holding the whole population there at gunpoint. The siege of the hotel, the arrest of Kelly himself (wounded despite the protection of his suit of armour), and the killing of the three other members of the gang by police and volunteers, has become a legend, part of Australia's folk-history. This found its first form in the extensive coverage in words and images in the illustrated press, a climax to the press coverage throughout the gang's notorious history.

The second and later trains to arrive at the scene brought the artists and photographers from the competing newspapers, anxious to provide the most dramatic and authentic coverage of the event. One of these, Julian Ashton, was an artist who had come to Australia in 1878 to work on the staff of the Syme newspaper, the *Illustrated Australian News*, for a salary of £300 per annum. He was characteristic of a new generation of immigrant artists whose need to earn their living working as press illustrators was not inconsistent with their advocacy of painting *en plein air*, or with their emerging interest in a distinctively Australian range of subject matter.[18]

Illustration 1 (*The Capture of Ned Kelly*) is more than simply characteristic of this kind of work; it marks the end of one mode of illustration—the work of the painter-illustrator—and the beginning of another, the era of 'news' photography, the precursors of which can be seen in illustrations 3 and 4. The conflict between dramatic effect and authenticity in newspaper illustrations was not yet resolved in 1880. It is accentuated in illustration 1 by a 'subterfuge', which in a relatively short time would prove unacceptable

to a public wishing to read and believe in the news media. The 'subterfuge' in illustration 1 is that Julian Ashton arrived too late to witness the incident he portrayed:

One afternoon I received a message from Mr. Syme to meet him. He informed me that a train was leaving Spencer Street at seven o'clock with police and Press *en route* to Glenrowan, and asked me to go and get material for drawings for the *Illustrated Australian News*. I travelled with Captain Standish, head of the Victorian Police, and reached Glenrowan in the early hours of a wintry morning. As I walked towards the rear of the train I noticed advancing towards me a tall dark-bearded man, limping slightly, with a policeman on either side of him. He had been handcuffed, and his fierce dark eyes rolled suspiciously around. He was made fast to the rail running around the luggage van, a policeman being left in charge.[19]

It is arguable that to refer to an established convention as a 'subterfuge' is a misrepresentation in the absence of any alternative convention. In a real sense, the 'division of labour' which was already occurring between the photographer and the illustrator was limited only by the technological stages through which photography passed.[20] By 1880 the photographer was at the point of being able to 'stop action', to take what we now refer to as 'candid' photograph, a photograph of the event *as it occurs* (4). This 'division of labour' is further evident in the drawing made by Ashton of Joe Byrne's body (2). Here the dramatic reconstruction of an event is less artificially conceived and executed:

Byrne's body was taken to the next township where there was a police station and placed in a cell. As my work was to get some illustrations for the paper I was allowed in the cell which was about eight by six feet. Here I sat on the cold cement floor and, by the light of a candle stuck in a bottle, made a drawing of the dead man. I was glad when I got out in the sunlight again.[21]

Clearly, the artist-illustrator fulfilled a need for the imaginative, evocative, dramatic and even romantic image which the photographer was unable to provide. On the other
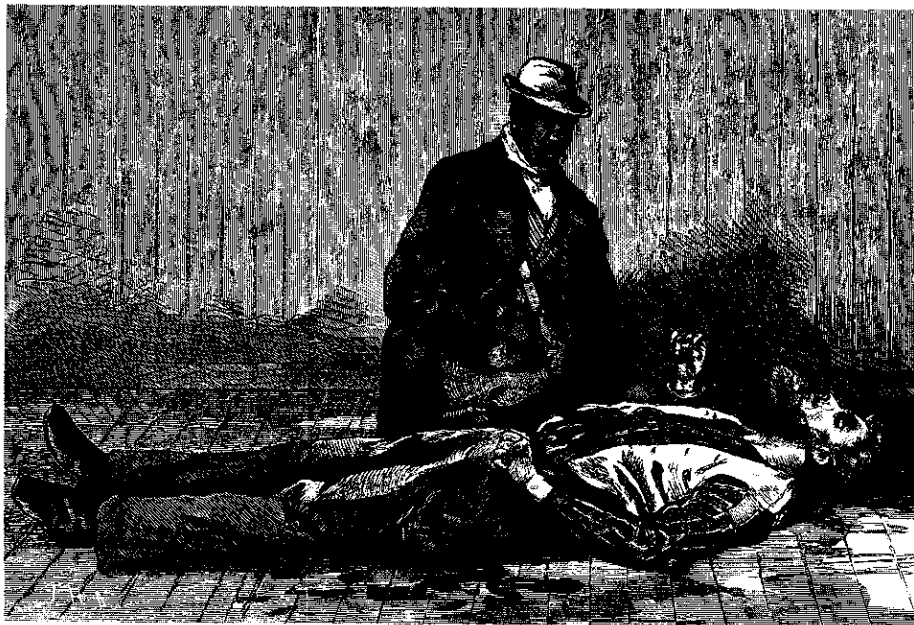
hand, the photographer excelled in the depiction of topography and landscape, of botany and technology, and in this case *nature morte* (3 and 4).

By comparison with Ashton's drawing, the illustration from the *Bulletin* (3) appears somewhat prosaic to our eyes. In its own time, however, the caption, 'From a picture taken at Benalla by Mr. Burman, Victorian Government Photographer' *proved* its authenticity, in direct contrast to that produced by Ashton.

Perhaps the photographer J.W. Lindt saw what was happening in a much more perceptive way when he set up his camera to show more than the body of Joe Byrne. He chose to include both Julian Ashton (on the left, with a sketch-book under his arm) and another photographer, possibly Mr Burman himself (4). It is perhaps also a reflection of Lindt's extraordinary prescience that it was not itself used as a 'news' photograph, and was not published until 1941 in Ashton's autobiography. The arresting qualities of this photograph derive as much from the significance of the historical event and its macabre aftermath as from another level of meaning altogether. This latter significance is that a relationship between working artist and working photographer has been seen and recorded, fixed forever by the action of another photographer.[22] The historical moment at which such relationships could be recorded by photographic means had arrived and in the literal way which is particular only to photography the developing nature of that relationship was demonstrated to be irreversible.

III

In the first part of this paper I referred to the 'dynamic' interrelationship between the forms and conventions of painting and photography, and other forms of visual representation. To pursue the subject further it will be necessary to consider the practice of the photographer on formal, material and ideological grounds, and compare it with that of the painter in similar circumstances.

Charles Bayliss was the foremost topographical and landscape photographer in Sydney during the late 1870s and 1880s. He began his career in 1869 as assistant to Beaufoy

Merlin, with whom he travelled widely through Victoria and New South Wales.[23] In Hill End in 1870, Bernard Otto Holtermann engaged Merlin to begin the project of celebrating in photographs the characteristics and virtues of the land in which Holtermann had found his fortune.[24] When Merlin died in 1873, Bayliss took over the ambitious project, to be known as Holtermann's Exposition. It was planned for exhibition at the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition and the Paris *Exposition Universelle Internationale* of 1878, to name only the most prominent exhibitions in its overseas itinerary. The quality and achievement of the project can be understood both by its scale and by its successful reception by the judges.[25] Part of the attention Holtermann's Exposition attracted was due to the inclusion of a three-panel panorama of Sydney—the largest photographs ever produced, taken on plates 96 x 160cm, made in a camera especially constructed in the tower of Holtermann's mansion at North Sydney. Other panoramas produced by Bayliss measured up to 10 metres in length. The sections of these panoramas were joined together on a canvas scroll, or mounted sequentially in specially prepared albums, or sold individually to be included in the travel albums which were then popular.

In 1876 Bayliss established himself independently as a 'Landscape Photographer', and maintained studios at various addresses in George Street until his death in 1897.[26] While continuing the production of panoramic views, for which he became well-known, he also travelled widely in New South Wales and Victoria, using first wet-plate and then dry-plate technology. His stock-in-trade ranged from the panorama and street scene to scenic photographs which accentuate both the dramatic and picturesque character of the Australian bush. In the latter category his work compares favourably with that of Charles Nettleton, of Melbourne, and with the series published by the Scottish photographer George Washington Wilson.

Illustration 5 is a gold-toned albumen print identified in the lower left corner by the blindstamp 'C. Bayliss Photo. Sydney'. Although we do not know the exact date of its execution, indications given by the length of exposure of this and others in the series

4 J.W. Lindt, 1880, original print not known. Copy from the La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne

would suggest the early 1880s. In itself it is a *deceptive* photograph, which is, in relation to the expectations of the period, a measure of its success. By deceptive, I mean that Bayliss has *disguised* the necessary conditions of its production: apart from the rigid pose of the central figures, the photograph achieves a remarkable illusion of activity. This is despite the long exposure necessary in the dim conditions of the shed, which means that the 'action' had been carefully staged for the camera.

Again, in itself the photograph is remarkably descriptive of the shearing process, from the actual line of shearers on the left to the sorting tables on the right. Some of the details show an engaging animation. The tar-boy at the extreme lower left is smiling at the novelty of the occasion, bearing a marked resemblance to his counterpart in *Shearing the Rams*. The two men at centre left watch the camera, the one to be told when he can release the sheep down the chute, the other stopped in the act of sharpening his shears with a whetstone.

In formal terms, a comparison with Tom Roberts' *The Golden Fleece: Shearing at Newstead* (1894) (6) reveals many similarities: on the right there is the shearer pausing to sharpen his shears, and again the tar-boy smiles out at the spectator. Like Bayliss, Roberts has set out to show the whole process, but in a form of pictorial organization which avoids the central, idealized figure of the shearer in the earlier *Shearing the Rams* (as well as the symbolic implication of it being the rams which are being shorn). In the later painting we

see *the gang* of shearers in action. The paintings are contrasted in their formal organiza-
tion, from a central figure who is the embodiment of 'strong masculine labour' to a central
void, with the workers arranged to left and right, in the later painting. There is a further
contrast between these two paintings in the way Roberts has used his colours: in *Shearing
the Rams* the central figures are more vibrantly coloured and in a higher key than the
others of the gang; in *Shearing at Newstead* the whole interior is bathed with the same
warm light, and a uniform tonality.

The central figures in the Bayliss photograph (5) reveal it to be both a portrait and an
image of a productive process. The central figure is the owner of the property: next to him
stand his overseer and foreman. Their social rank is reflected not only in their clothing but
by the formal organization of the photograph. The photograph is being taken for the
owner of the property, just as the sheep are being shorn for him. The twenty-six other
people in the photograph have been stopped in their work so that the photographer can
make the image he has been commissioned to make.

The nature of the photographer's task can also be seen in illustrations 7 and 8, taken
from the same album as illustration 5. Each shows the owner of the property literally
declaring his ownership; not only of fine horses, or of a newly planted formal garden, but
of the whole valley beyond. The gardener, as employee, stands awkwardly in the artificial
environment he has created, turning his head as the exposure is made, thus blurring his
image. But it is not *his* image that matters, for it is the figures on the lawn who are to be
remembered. These photographs are a celebration of class privilege.

6 Tom Roberts, *The
Golden Fleece: Shearing at
Newstead*, oil on canvas,
104.1 x 158.8 cm, 1894. Art
Gallery of New South
Wales, Sydney

How then do Roberts' paintings escape the stigma of such a charge, and become validated by succeeding generations as more than stereotypes, as if revealing some greater 'truth' about the nature of rural life in the early 1890s? The photographs show the social relationship between photographer and client in their content and in the formal organization of the image itself. Similarly, they show social relationships which are the consequence of the client's ownership of productive wealth. In the paintings such formal or social relationships are absent. The few figures who could be thought to be owners, or bosses, or foremen are formally marginalized: they squat out of the way of the activity, lean on the windowsill in the background, or peer from the edge of the picture. They are not portraits. They do not need to be. The nature of the form is such that the class of owners of productive wealth stand *in front* of pictures of this kind. The ownership of paintings confirms what the photographer records in unavoidable detail.

But this is too generalized. It does not take into account the different ideological tasks of the painter or photographer, or their different class positions or aspirations. The complex relations of class interests which existed at that time between the city and the country further complicate their respective meanings.

IV

While it is highly likely that Roberts would have been familiar with Bayliss' work, this is not in itself particularly significant. Roberts' familiarity with photography is an intrinsic part of his whole career. His early training was in portrait photography, when he was apprenticed to Richard Stewart in Melbourne from 1870 to 1881. While he eventually became senior operator with this firm, from all accounts it appears that he was never particularly proficient.[27] His skills lay more with the imaginative pose of the subject, which he often embellished with displays of native flora. On his return to Australia in
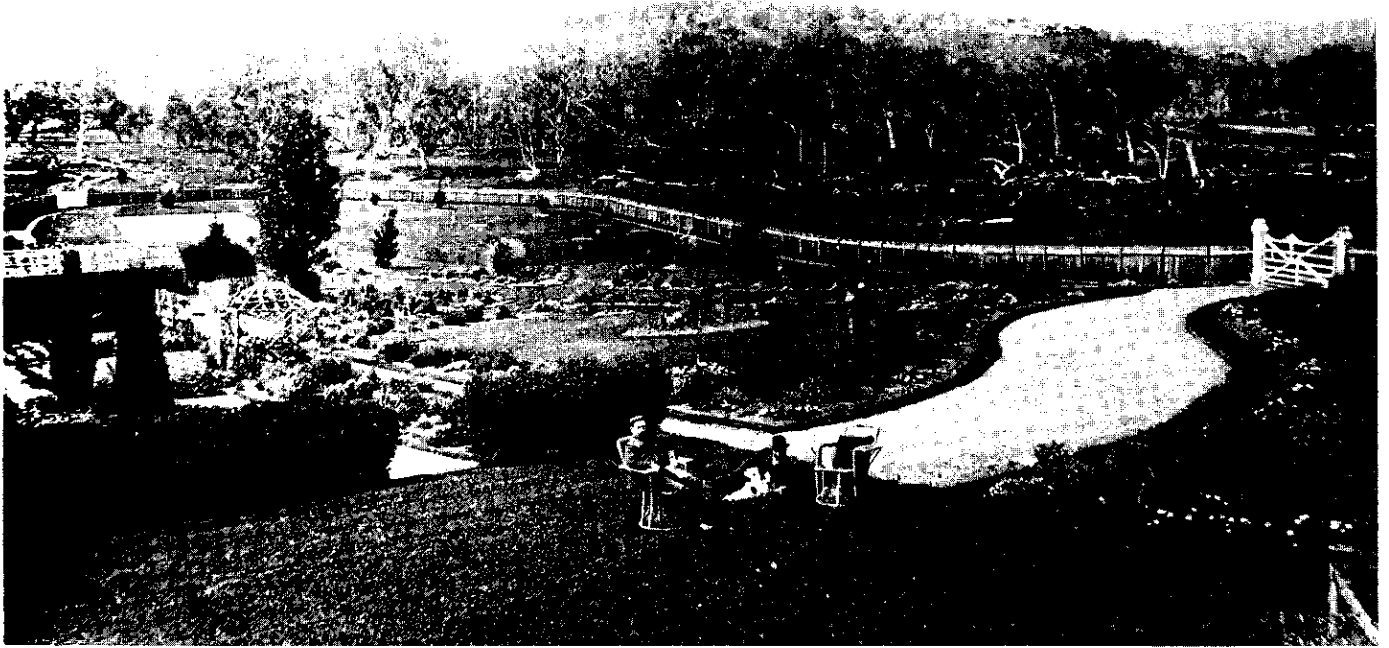
1885, he was employed by the photographer Andrew Barrie to 'reorganise the posing, lightings and backgrounds' of the photographic studios.[28] His acceptance of the utilitarian value of photography may however date from the earlier influence of his painting master, Louis Buvelot, who had been a successful portrait and landscape photographer in Brazil from 1845 to 1885, and on his arrival in Melbourne in 1865.[29]

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Charles Conder should make the casual suggestion that Roberts should use photographs to assist in painting *The Breakaway*, and it also suggests that neither artist sought to actively involve themselves in the aesthetic controversy of so-called 'photographic' realism.

Roberts' contact with photography occurred also on the more mundane level of his occasional work as a newspaper illustrator[30], that is, as a result of the *de facto* 'division of labour' between photographer and painter/illustrator referred to earlier. In the four years Roberts spent in London studying at the Royal Academy, he supported himself by working for *The Graphic* and other illustrated newspapers. With the technological advances made by photography and the various photomechanical means of reproduction in that period, Roberts would have been acutely aware of the inroads being made on the traditional domain of the painter/illustrator.

It is normal to expect of artists a more keenly developed awareness of basic changes in their visual culture. One might also expect that, as artists, they would be in a unique position to exploit potential changes, or to consciously reject their potential influence. Artists, however, are social beings, and with the rest of the audience to whom the illustrated popular press addressed its messages of word and image, the artists of the time were themselves subject to its effects. In the period under study, the means of transmitting photographically derived visual images had reached a crucial stage in a process leading towards its formal domination of what was to become the 'mass media'. This had inevitably influenced the modes of practice of all visual imagery. The novelty of the

photographic image had carried with it the dual cliché of objectivity and impartiality, which perfectly suited the class-interest and partiality of the owners of the Press.

The question of the ideological character of a painting or a photograph can be approached by considering one form in relation to the other, bearing in mind their relative contexts of use and the traditions in which each is located. A further basis for consideration is the nature of the complementary and competitive tasks performed by painters and photographers for the illustrated press. In this respect the changes in the nature of their tasks in the late nineteenth century indicate the gradual decline to a peripheral importance of the role of the painter-as-illustrator, and a corresponding domination of the illustrated press by the photographer. This development on the economic level had consequences in relation to the modes of practice of both forms. In conjunction with the depressed economic conditions of the 1890s, this made the life of the painter considerably more difficult.

The painter of subject-paintings like *Shearing at Newstead* relied almost entirely on the public patronage of the trustees of the colonial galleries. It can be argued that from the outset the painter of this kind of painting had in mind an audience much broader than that class of people wealthy enough to *own* such pictures in the first place.[31] Yet an earlier point still holds: the painter intends by such a picture that its meaning transcends the particularity of time, place and, more importantly, of the private ownership of the productive processes depicted. Social relationships are abstracted: for the audience of such a painting the question of ownership is obscured.

Roberts wrote in defence of *Shearing the Rams* 'that by making art the perfect expression of one time and one place, it becomes art for all time and all places'.[32] For the photographer the consequences of the changes in the period under study corresponds closely to the development of the ideological function of the illustrated popular press. Like the newspaper, the photograph, including those discussed in the latter part of this paper and despite their partial function as portraits, is from the outset the product of a publishing venture. The photographic image in this period is not unique, and is therefore not confined to any one context of use. The photographer prints and sells as many copies of an image as the market will take, as is the case with the Bayliss photographs. We can only say in broad terms what happens to any *particular* image, but we can deduce a certain amount of information concerning the photographer's audience and market if we consider the range of categories within which the photographer characteristically produced. We find that images of labour are far less common than, say, photographs which have a novelty value (disasters, freaks, famous personalities, etc.) or those of a general topographical nature (the travel album), or of a scientific or technological interest.[33]

Photographs of labour processes are related to the last-mentioned category, as images which typify the subject-matter from the point of view of the buyer. Images which contradict or challenge the viewpoint of a prospective customer did not sell! Photographs which might be thought to be exceptions to this rule (e.g., the Lindt photograph) were produced under atypical circumstances, or for motives which contradicted normal practice. In contrast, the photographer's stock-in-trade in this category were those images which reinforced (or celebrated) the buyer's social relationship to those productive processes. In this respect the mode of practice of the professional photographer corresponded closely to the needs of the illustrated popular press. If this correspondence is true, we have established two things: the material basis for the intervention of photography in the other forms of nineteenth century visual culture, and a basis on which the investigation of the ideological character of the photograph in the nineteenth century should proceed.

Australian Art and Architecture Essays presented to Bernard Smith

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