



Tennyson grumbled about the 1865 photo of him by the "greatest pictorialist of her day."

Eminent Victorians

Julia Margaret Cameron's evocative photographs of Lord Tennyson and other 19th-century British notables pioneered the art of portraiture — BY VICTORIA OLSEN

WHEN ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON first saw the photograph that his friend Julia Margaret Cameron took of him in May 1865, he joked that he looked like a "dirty monk." After the portrait was exhibited, a critic wrote that any court in the land would consider it sufficient evidence to convict Tennyson, England's most celebrated poet, of vagrancy.

Cameron, the daughter of English civil servants and a descendant of French expatriates in India, was 49 years old at

the time and living near Tennyson in the village of Freshwater on the Isle of Wight. A mother of six, she had taken up photography only the year before, after her daughter and son-in-law gave her a camera and said, "It may amuse you, Mother, to try to photograph during your solitude at Freshwater."

The gift sparked a passion, and within months Cameron had mastered the difficult wet collodion technique of developing photographs. She began exhibiting and selling her bold,

"This is not dirt," Cameron said of her stained hands, "but *art!*"



Cameron (below, in 1874) staged many painterly Bible scenes. In 1872's "Angel of the Nativity," a great-niece wore swan's wings.

evocative work almost immediately: Photography itself was barely three decades old, and Cameron would be recognized as a pioneer of portrait photography and one of the first women in the field. An exhibition of her photographs is scheduled to open October 21 at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

Cameron's first subjects were family members, servants and neighbors. She created large, slightly blurred pictures that had a striking intimacy, especially compared with the small, formal portraits of the time. She posed members of her household in roles from literature or the Bible. Her maids played angels and Madonnas. But she is best known for her portraits of leading literary and scientific figures, including Thomas Carlyle, Sir John Herschel, Anthony Trollope and Charles Darwin.

Cameron seemed to relish the power that photography gave her over her subjects. She demanded that they sit for hours while she posed them and then exposed the large glass-plate negatives she used. Carlyle described his sitting as an "inferno." Tennyson was one of her most frequent models.

"Although I bully you," she once told him, "I have a corner of worship for you in my heart." Her "Dirty Monk" portrait, she reportedly boasted, was a "column of immortal grandeur—done by my will against his will."

There is an appropriate gravitas to Cameron's portrait of the craggy-faced Tennyson, author of the elegiac "In Memoriam A. H. H." and "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and England's poet laureate at the time it was taken. Yet he also appears disheveled and downright ordinary, and thus Cameron captures something paradoxical about him, that he is both mortal and immortal, sublime and maybe ridiculous. Cameron left her mark in another way: She printed a blob of emulsion that had dripped onto the glass negative. To her, flaws were a sign of originality, and more. When someone said the photographic chemicals that stained Cameron's hands made her resemble a beggar, she replied: "This is not dirt, but *art!*"

Cameron found herself at the center of the debate over the new medium. Some critics, emphasizing photography's scientific roots, complained about her "smudges" and insisted that images should be clear and sharply focused. But she argued that photography was an art form and defended her approach, blurriness included. "What is focus and who has the right to say what focus is the legitimate focus?" she demanded of her critics.

Despite their status, Cameron and her legal scholar husband, Charles Hay Cameron, had little money. In the 1870s, with debts piling up, she attempted to trade on Tennyson's phenomenally successful "Idylls of the King," which chronicled the fall of Camelot, and set out to publish two volumes of photographs inspired by the epic poem. She hired models and made hundreds of studies. She used the "Dirty Monk" as a frontispiece, and Tennyson's signature appeared in the book. All to no avail. She sold so few copies she didn't even cover her costs.

In 1875, Cameron and her husband moved to Sri Lanka, where three of their five sons were managing coffee plantations. She would take photographs in Sri Lanka, but never publish or exhibit them; her brief professional career was essentially over. She died there in 1879 at age 63. (Tennyson would die 13 years later at age 83.)

Cameron's life and work has long intrigued scholars and artists. In 1923, Virginia Woolf, a great-niece of Cameron's, wrote a comic play, *Freshwater*, about the cult of art and beauty

that surrounded Cameron and Tennyson. In the play, staged in 1935 as an amateur theatrical for Woolf's Bloomsbury friends and relatives, Cameron departs England for Sri Lanka with a valediction: "Take my lens. I bequeath it to my descendants. See that it is always slightly out of focus." ○

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