

Less is More. Clementina Fleeming Hawarden, Victorian Photographer.

One of a remarkable cohort of nineteenth-century photographers of Scottish origin, Clementina Hawarden (née Fleeming), was born on June 1, 1822, in Cumbernauld, Lanarkshire, about twelve miles north-east of Glasgow (fig. 1). Her father, Charles Elphinstone-Fleeming, was descended from two old Scottish families -- the Fleemings or Flemings and the Elphinstones -- whose nobility can be traced back to the fourteenth century. He had a distinguished career in the Royal Navy and also saw service -- in 1802-1803, and again in 1832-1835, after he retired from active service -- as M.P. for Stirlingshire, in which capacity he spoke out strongly, citing his own direct contacts and observations as a naval commander in the West Indies, in favour of the 1833 abolition of slavery bill. (His speech can be read in *Hansard*, June 3, 1833, pp. 326-330.) In 1816, he married a young Spanish girl, Doña Catalina Paulina Alesandro de Jiminez, in the Cathedral of Santa Cruz in Cadiz. He was aged 42, she was 16 at the time.



1. Cumbernauld House, the Elphinstone-Fleeming family residence, designed by William Adam and erected in 1731, near the site of the large castle built by the Fleemings or Flemings at the end of the 14th century ..

Clementina, one of four daughters born to the couple – another, Anne Elizabeth, was to become the mother of Robert Cunninghame-Graham, the well-known Scottish writer, adventurer, political activist, and first socialist M.P. – was raised in Cumbernauld and then in England. In 1845 she married – despite the disapproval of her betrothed’s parents -- Cornwallis Maude. The couple were financially strapped until, on the death of his father in 1856, Maude inherited the title Viscount Hawarden, and the couple moved to the Hawarden family estate at Dundrum, Co. Tipperary, in Ireland.

It was late in that year, after bearing him ten children -- of whom eight survived, seven girls and a boy – that, like many upper-class women at the time, regular artistic training being inaccessible to them partly because of their own family obligations, partly because of their exclusion from most art schools, and partly

because of social prejudice, she took up photography. Fortunately, Clementina's husband was strongly supportive of her photographic interests, which he shared, without doing any photography himself. Thus in 1864 he invested in a short-lived venture, the United Association of Photography and after Clementina's untimely death in 1865, he was made a member, in her place, of the Photographic Society of London. By 1862, Hawarden having been elected to the House of Lords by his Irish fellow-peers, the family had moved back to London. Clearly with her husband's approval, Clementina transformed two rooms in the couple's newly built residence at 5 Princes Gardens, South Kensington, into a studio and dark room where she continued to pursue her work as an amateur photographer.

As already noted, women were drawn to photography because of difficulties obstructing their path to painting or sculpture. Not that photography was an easy practice at the time. On the contrary, it required mastery of complex techniques, including – after 1851 -- manipulating chemicals for the collodion wet plate process. Nevertheless, some women succeeded in establishing themselves as professional portrait photographers or producers of small carte de visite photographs, while others sought to achieve in photography the artistry expected in painting or drawing. As pointed out in the excellent Wikipedia article on women photographers, "it was above all in northern Europe that women first entered the business of photography, opening studios in Denmark, France, Germany and Sweden from the 1840s, while it was in Britain that women from well-to-do families developed photography as an art in the late 1850s" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_photography).



2. Sassoferrato, *The Virgin in Prayer*. Oil on canvas. c.1640-50. Courtesy of the National Gallery, London.

By the time Hawarden took it up, the early view of photography as a mechanical process for producing a perfect record or facsimile had yielded to a view of it as insightful and revelatory, comparable to what an artist in other media such as painting might achieve. As though to make the point, one of the champions of the photograph as a work of art, the prolific, probably Swedish-born English

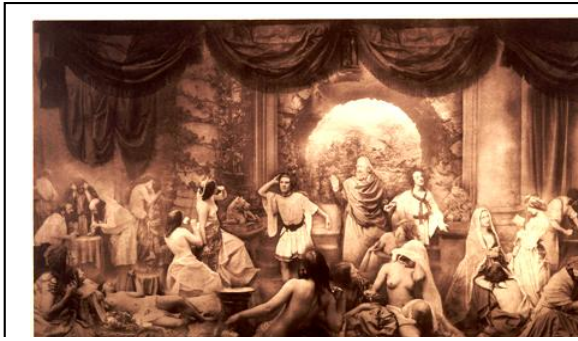


3. Oscar Rejlander, *The Virgin in Prayer*. Albumen print, c. 1857. Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London

photographer Oscar Rejlander, who had started out as a student of painting, produced a photographic portrait (fig. 2) reminiscent of a painting, “The Virgin in Prayer,” by the seventeenth-century Italian artist Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato

(fig. 3) and also pioneered the technique of combining several different negatives to create a single final image, once again reminiscent of early paintings (fig. 4). The photographic portrait, in particular, proved to be as capable, in its own way, as the painted portrait of presenting its creator’s vision of the sitter’s character, mood, and social standing (figs. 5-8).

Clementina’s photographic work (about 800 photographs between 1856 and her death in 1865) was largely devoted to images of her daughters, especially the two named Clementina and Isabella – often together, sometimes alone. It is by no means clear, however, that these should be considered primarily as portraits, even full-length portraits. To a 21st century viewer, the emphasis seems to fall less on the character or mood of the subjects than on the the composition itself, the relation of line, light, and shade.



4. Oscar Rejlander, *Two Ways of Life*. Montage. Albumen Print. 1857. Wikimedia



5. Hill and Adamson, *Miss Patricia Morris*. Salted Paper Print, 1843, Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum, New York



6. Thomas Annan, *David Livingstone*. Carbon print. 1864. Courtesy of Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh



Albumen print. c. 1860-64. Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London.



8. Julia Cameron, *William Rossetti*. Albumen print. 1865. Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

These are certainly feature of all works of visual art, including the photographic portraits (figs. 5-8) represented here. In Clementina's work they are the dominant characteristics. The womens' physiognomy or expression is

rarely viewed at close range or highlighted; usually it is distinctly secondary to line, body form, and background light and shade, including mirror effects. One might even venture to describe these images as inclining towards the "abstract" in relation to much

contemporary photography (figs. 9, 10). At the very least, rather than disclosing the character or identity of individuals, the individuality of the subjects is secondary to the formal pattern created by the play of light and shade and the repetition of the figure through her reflection in a mirror, or her view of a sisterly likeness on the other side of a window or in a similar pose. While Pre-Raphaelite painting also manifests anti-realist tendencies, both the color effects and the anecdotal element in many of them remove them from the severe formal emphasis of Hawarden's photographic portraits.



9. Isabella Grace and Clementina Maude. albumen print. c.1862-63. Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum.



10. Clementina Maude. Albumen print. c. 1863. Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum Museum.

There are few male figures in Hawarden's work, her three regular models being her daughters, Clementina Maude, Isabella Grace, and Florence Elizabeth. This could be explained by the difficulty of finding models and, in particular, of admitting male models other than family members into a studio located in her home, but it was more probably the photographer's choice, her will, as an artist, to represent her loved ones, not as "characters," not as individuals, but as figures both of women's isolation and of their sisterhood.

Hawarden's talent and originality were recognized by contemporaries, such as Oscar Rejlander, who encouraged her to

pursue her photographic interests, and Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a.k.a. Lewis Carroll of *Alice in Wonderland*, a prolific photographer himself as well as a collector. At a “Grand Fête and Bazaar,” held to raise money for a new building for the Royal Female School of Art, Hawarden had set up a booth where she could photograph guests -- the only known occasion on which she took photographs in public. Lewis Carroll, already an admirer of her work, and, according to his diary (24 July, 1864), a visitor to the Hawardens’ home, brought two children to be photographed at this booth and purchased the resulting prints. In addition, work by Hawarden was displayed at the January 1863 and 1864 annual exhibitions of the Photographic Society of London (founded in January 1853; since 1894 the Royal Photographic Society), winning a medal for composition in 1863 -- followed by election to membership of the Society -- and another silver medal in 1864.

In contrast, however, to Julia Cameron, for instance, Hawarden and her work fell completely out of view soon after her death. At an exhibition organized in 1939 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London to mark the centenary of the invention of photography no work at all by Hawarden was on display, prompting a surprised and disappointed grand-daughter to donate a collection of 775 of her grandmother’s 800 or so photographs to the museum. Some of these were included in a touring exhibition organised by the V & A in 1984 to mark “The Golden Age of British Photography, 1839 – 1900” but it was not until September, 1989 -- January, 1990, that the V & A mounted an exhibition devoted entirely to Hawarden, “Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden. Photography,” with a catalogue by Virginia Dodier, who had worked on the collection for many years, since she was a graduate student. A somewhat reduced version of this exhibition travelled in 1991 to the Musée d’Orsay in Paris (“Lady Hawarden, Photographe victorien”), with a French translation of Dodier’s catalogue put out by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, and then to the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Getty Museum in Malibu, California, also in 1991. It was this exhibition that was the occasion of a pioneering essay in the *New Yorker* magazine (see below). Still more recently, on the threshold of the present century, in 1999, the Victoria and Albert opened a major exhibition, “Lady Clementina Hawarden. Studies from Life, 1857-1864,” devoted to Hawarden’s work. A full-scale study of Hawarden by Virginia Dodier, with the same title, accompanied the exhibition (London and New York: Aperture Books, 1999).

It could well be that the renewal of interest, virtually the rediscovery of Hawarden’s work after decades of oblivion is attributable, in the first instance, to modern openness to the erotic. Indeed, it may well have been his discerning an erotic element in it that already appealed, in Hawarden’s own time, to Lewis Carroll. It has been argued, notably in a 2015 BBC documentary, *The Secret World of Lewis Carroll* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= KQ9kDbduTo>), that Carroll

was a repressed paedophile and many of his photographs would appear to lend support to that claim. Certainly, the first major work devoted to the large collection acquired by the Victoria and Albert in 1939 -- *Clementina, Lady Hawarden* (London: Academy Editions, 1974) -- was by a well regarded English painter and photographer, Graham Ovenden, who had a keen interest in the erotic. His book, *Victorian Erotic Photography*, had appeared the year before, with the same publisher, and some decades later, in 2013, he was sentenced to 27 months in jail for creating indecent images, the judge ruling that his paintings and photographs of naked or partially naked children should be destroyed!

Similarly, in a pioneering 1991 *New Yorker* magazine article devoted to Hawarden and Cindy Sherman and referred to earlier, Ingrid Sischy, the editor of *Art Forum* and contributing editor of *Vanity Fair* and the *New Yorker*, while acknowledging that Hawarden was “a marvellous balancer, capturing with breathtaking grace the sweep of pattern, the folds and fall of cloth, the shimmers and shafts of light, the meetings of planes and of gestures and of eyes [. . .] in near empty settings” altogether different from the work of other “photographers of her time,” who “didn’t go in this less-is-more direction,” emphasized that “sensuality oozes from many of these pictures. Hawarden liked to pair her daughters, either by posing them together in tableaux or by using mirrors, which gave her an intimate double image, and some of these scenes are ripe for being taken as erotically charged love scenes” (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1991/05/06/lets-pretend>). Hopefully, it is not ungenerous to speculate that, as a Lesbian (married in 2015, just before her death, to her longtime partner, the photographer Sandra Brent), Sischy was especially inclined to discern and highlight an erotic element in Hawarden’s work. A similar emphasis, in a still more recent study, on an alleged eroticism in Hawarden’s photography also resulted, the writer herself implies, from openly acknowledged personal experience and desires. As noted by a reviewer of Carol Mavor’s *Becoming. The Photography of Lady Clementina Hawarden* (Duke University Press, 1999), Mavor’s “own personal desire fuels her study: ‘I fetishize her camera’ (xix), or ‘I fall for Hawarden. She is my new magical person. [. . .] Gazing into Hawarden’s picture-world can induce a fantasy of being Hawarden’(xxx).” Mavor performs “this adolescent voice of hero worship throughout the book,” according to the reviewer. “She imagines ‘a homosexual secret,’ in the words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (xxiii). Sedgwick’s theories encourage Mavor to construct a ‘queer’ Hawarden whose figures gaze narcissistically in mirrors or dreamily off into space” (Julie F. Codell, in *Biography*, 24/2, Spring 2001, 477-83).

Many modern viewers, however, are likely to be most impressed, like the present writer, by the striking and, at the time, unusual emphasis, in Hawarden’s photographs, on more abstract, formal features: composition, the structuring role

of light, shade, and space, and the absence of distracting physical detail. There is certainly nothing in Hawarden's work remotely resembling the androgynous figures and sometimes overtly same-sex relationships characteristic of paintings and drawings by the Pre-Raphaelite painter Simeon Solomon, for instance.

* * *

For copious displays of work by Hawarden, in addition to the studies of Ovenden, Dodier, and Mavor, see

<https://www.pinterest.com/skategal67/lady-clementina-hawarden/>

and the relevant webpage of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London:

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/lady-clementina-hawarden-an-introduction> .

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/search/?slug=hawarden-clementina-viscountess&name=A8493&offset=0>

What follows is a sampling of her photographs, chiefly of her daughters, though with one of her husband and a very young daughter. All are reproduced courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. All are albumen prints, made between 1861 and 1864. Sizes range from 7.2 x 7.5 to 9.6 x 11.3 inches.







On left, exceptionally, a landscape photograph, taken on the grounds of Dundrum House, the Hawardson property in Ireland in the late 1850s. The focus on light and shade is already visible in this early work