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Title: Sheffield then and now: myths of place in local history picture books

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Sheffield then and now: myths of place in local history picture books

Abstract

One significant way in which place is represented is through books based on old photographs and postcards. Recontextualised in such books, historical photos can be used to create mesmeric myths about a locality. This paper explores the genre through four works about areas in Sheffield, a city in the north of England. The book for the well to do suburb, Crosspool, constructs a quaint rural past. Two representations of a working class district are perhaps a little more successful in recovering a personally significant past. The history of a local steel firm avoids issues of social conflict and exploitation by adopting a documentary tone. The genre trades on the active interest of seeing familiar scenes as they were in the past, but fails to develop interpretative strategies, such as asking about the context of photos' original creation or reflecting on how they have been reused.

The dominant images of a city – the way in which life is characterised and popularly understood is partly the result of a process of mediation through forms of popular cultural representation. One influential form is the pictorial book through which local identity and ‘sense of place’ are affirmed through collections of archive photographs and postcards, such as the books in the Tempus’ “Images of England” series or Sutton publishing’s “Britain in old photographs”. Such texts raise interesting questions about the construction of place in public consciousness. This paper will argue that these books present compelling ‘myths’ about the places we live, but in their willingness to ‘fix’ interpretation they might also disguise other ‘home truths’ especially where there is a social and political reality of deprivation and exploitation. Thirty years ago Umberto Eco made the point that: “A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection — not an invitation for hypnosis.” (Eco 1979: 12).

Arguably, books like the picture books examined here, exert, if not an invitation for hypnosis, at least a willing suspension of disbelief, the studium of passive, vicarious study which provides particular views of the social history of place. Photographic images are always ambiguous; at once explicit, material traces of the ‘real’ and the objects of illusory spectacle. Indeed the fluidity of the image makes them ideally placed as part of a hegemonic process by which the realities of everyday life are expressed through a form of ‘depoliticised speech’. (Barthes 1984: 142). “Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.” (ibid)

Of course, photographs are an ideal vehicle for this process of ‘hiding in plain view’. They have a specificity and appear to provide a sense of verisimilitude. The debate about indexicality of the image is never going to go away, because at a certain level, photographs really do portray the configuration of real objects in front of the camera. However, this capacity of the photographic image must be treated with constant suspicion because although what is seen is not hidden or ‘untrue’ it can (and has frequently been) manipulated for ideological ends. Not only this, but they are also open to multiple interpretations.

At a more material level posterity receives a highly edited and partial view of what the past was like in the way images are selected and survive. The most fundamental limit, of course, is the late emergence of photography itself. To tell the history of a place solely by photographs immediately limits the time frame. Furthermore for a hundred years after its invention it was a domain of professionals and serious enthusiasts. What was photographed and how, depended on institutions and their specific needs from photography (be that for publicity or for documentation), limits of available technologies, conventions of what it was appropriate to photograph - as well as the many critical decisions and choices made by a specific photographer on a specific occasion. Our view of what photography can show from the past is further limited by what has survived and how it is accessible, determined by evolving criteria of selection and indexing by individuals and also institutions like archives. Methods of access to photos limit our ability to find or understand relevant images. The vast body of historic images that survive for a city are then “repeatedly recontextualised” (Crang 1996) in newspapers, books,

museums or pub decoration. In producing a publication like a local history picture book market forces and publishers' policies and editorial choice further shape a particular selection from what is available.

Yet masking these processes of selection and attrition, popular pictorial history images present a spectacle of history that can seemingly be experienced directly. "Awareness of history as an *interpretation* of the past succumbs to a faith in history as *representation*. The viewer is confronted, not by *historical-writing*, but by the appearance of *history itself*." (Sekula 1999, 187 original emphasis)

Sontag goes even further in questioning the value of photographs as historical evidence and how we view the past:

"Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no." (Sontag 1977, 23 original emphasis)

This is an extreme position, for the visual is one route to understanding the world, and as a record of how the world did look like in the past a photograph might be a source of knowledge. But she is right in identifying that it is hard to say "no" to a photograph, by virtue of the way it represses interpretation.

Sontag quotes Brecht to the effect that a photograph of a Krupps works can never say much about the organisation and social exploitation. Again, this could be seen as an exaggeration, for it can say something, although Krupps themselves would be likely to have a strong hand in controlling what is said. The danger is trying to read off 'information' from the image without taking into account the purposes for which it was produced and the limits placed on what is represented, especially those limits arising from the power of organisations to control their own image or of weaker groups not to control their own (as in the way documentary photography was used persuasively to argue the case to clear slums, without any involvement of the population itself (Tagg 1988). Sontag says that photography imagines a "past that is unreal," certainly it is a fragment of reality.

Photographs never speak for themselves:

"Despite the powerful impression of reality photographs [...] in themselves are fragmentary and incomplete utterances... Meaning is always directed by layout, captions, text, and site and mode of presentation." (Sekula 1999, 184).

For the historian the fallacy that image based history commits is of not asking Marwick's (2001) question: why was the document written and so what biases it may have? (See also Tagg 1988, 119). In many cases the context cannot ever be recovered. Of course all histories are partial and prone to bias reflecting a restless disparity between the position of observers and implicit institutional biases (class, gender and ethnicity to name only the most obvious ones). The critical visual analyst will be concerned to trace the flow and circulation of social meanings rather than accepting compartmentalised and partial constructions of place, recognising: "...that the institutional sites of discursive productivity are both social and semiotic, both actions of people and representations in media, and that social institutions over which semiotic struggle occurs are much more widely diffused than the obvious kinds, with walls around them." (Hartley, 1992: 34).

This paper explores the construction of visual myths about some places in the city of Sheffield in Northern England, through picture books. The partial characterisation of Sheffield districts which are examined in the current paper include: idyllic images of a genteel ‘imagined community’ (Crosspool) – approaches tinged with nostalgia, personal celebration of narrow local knowledges (the Attercliffe texts) and an official company history which seems almost elegiac in its choice of imagery and obliviousness to the harshness of working experiences in the steel industry (Firth Brown).

Crosspool

Fairly typical works in the photographic local history genre are the Tempus book on the suburb of Sheffield, Crosspool (Hanson 2003) and her later collection (Hanson 2010) published by Amberley. The more well-to-do suburbs on the Western fringes of Sheffield, such as Crosspool, each have their own photo history in the series, the eastern industrial suburbs such as Attercliffe or Brightside do not. Doubtless this reflects a larger market among more wealthy suburbs, for whom part of property ownership is the desire to find roots locally. Lacking other means (actual roots, actual memories, a collective consciousness) to construct such a history, printed works such as this supply suitable material to imagine an appropriate past.

An initial problem for Hanson’s first book, however, is to establish that Crosspool is a place at all. As she acknowledges it is “an undefined area” lacking the village origins claimed for many Sheffield suburbs. Her solution, rhetorically, is to use establishing shots around a particular road crossing. Out of the first four photos three picture this from different angles. This hints that it is a place through which people pass, more than a locality. Subsequent photos in the first section of the book fix an image of a largely rural past with pictures of a “traffic free road” (like today but less busy), a snowy scene (an era more vulnerable to the climate), a blurry picture of a man making a delivery from a horse drawn cart (a charmingly antiquated economy). This serves to establish (accurately) a largely rural past for the area. This is contrasted at the end of the section with a double page spread aerial view showing the modern housing development in situ. Virtually the whole area has suddenly now become a large suburb.

That the second section of the book, “Houses and homes” is the largest suggests a stress not on physical bricks and mortar (what is actually visible in the photos) but bourgeois domestic values, symbolised by the house. There is a mix of cottages and a few more modern houses. The upper class halls, now demolished, are, democratically, demoted to somewhere in the middle of the section, though presumably in the past they were central to local socio-economic structures. Shops and pubs are presumably central to the book as the only real public spaces through which a sense of localness can be constructed. An emphasis on school reflects the current character of the locality, a well-to-do suburb with many young families. Many of the photos of “people”, primarily children or family groups, seem to be chosen to represent the family as an institution, with some reference to voluntary activity.

As with many such local history works there is little direct referencing of sources either for the photos or to support any factual claims made about the buildings or events pictured. Photos are rarely even approximately

dated. A central task is to identify, to name things. The author acknowledges the problematic nature of the sources for her as an author, but without problematising it as an issue for the reader (Hanson 2003, 8). Although there are approximately a dozen seemingly modern photos of old things which survive to the present (their origin is masked by being reproduced like the other photos in the book in black and white), the stress is on using available old images to picture the past. Thus this approach to constructing a history often seems to exclude the idea of generating relevant, more representative modern material of surviving buildings or landscapes, which might counterbalance the survival of contemporary imagery.

Some photos create and quickly half solve tiny historical mysteries, such as what was the Wesley tower? (Hanson 2003, 28) Local history trades on such puzzles, curious facts, but which hang outside any real historical framework. Many local history picture books (such as Vickers 1973, Howse 2000) are structured simply around a “then” and “now” duality, a picture from the past and the scene as it is today. Hanson (2010) fits into this genre. Sepia toned old photos are set alongside modern colour photos. “Spotting the difference” between two images has an inherent enjoyment, inviting an active engagement beyond simple spectatorship. These are often, as Crang suggests, an invitation to notice “an absence” (1996, 442) what has been lost, but we can also notice continuity or even greater comfort, prosperity and order. Hanson (2003) too asks to be read in this way, with frequent comments in the captions inviting us to compare the photo before us to what we know today. This has a genuine fascination for the local resident inviting them to imagine things differently. For the younger reader the imaginative connection from now to then is supported. Some readers may genuinely remember the places; or have some memory of old styles of fashion or street furniture. Viewing such photos often elicits active reminiscence, is a “provocation to talk” and construct a “recollective palimpsest” (Crang 1996), not hypnosis. The process by which an author collects photographs from local residents and researches images with them, is often itself an active practice in which a local community is brought into consciousness, if tenuously. Some of the picture books in the series from Sheffield were created as projects of local history groups (e.g. Stannington Local History Group (2004)).

However, the totality of the 2003 book seems to construct a unitary, largely rural, early C20th ‘then’ to be contrasted to a largely unpictured suburban present. The past is the past of parents’ or grandparents’ memory or just before. Farms, trams and horse drawn vehicles, quaint fashions, a coronation celebration or a carnival. A longer unfolding of historical processes is invisible. The caption to the map on page 8 captures this dichotomisation when it says “the area was poised for future development.” Thus the assumed present is read back as immanent in the past. By collapsing down complex historical change, such as the operation of economic forces arising from the proximity of a huge industrial city and competing possible futures, to a then- now duality, between a “family friendly”, comfortable present (so obvious, so permanent that it does not need to be pictured) and a picturesquely poor rural past, the many challenges of history are defused. Even why and how Crosspool was made into a suburb is not explored - we are not told exactly when it occurred, which builders or council officials were involved or who profited. Part of the effect is to fix the present as inevitable, since we only glimpse it once or twice in the process of being made (Hanson 2003, 16, 20). Whereas describing the industrial East, Hey

et al (1997, 7) stress change as the constant factor, in this suburb history does seem to have ended. Occasionally wider events intrude, such as when two houses levelled by bombing in world war two (Hanson 2003, 29). But the scale of the image is of a suburban tragedy: a house fire or car crash.

To the current suburban population, whose grandparents or parents probably did *not* live here, who are recent immigrants (from the 20s to the 70s), the past is one they could have wished for and have literally bought into: Rural, clean and peaceful. There is no trace in the pictures of Sheffield's industrial past (even the light steel trades which operated in the valley bottom close by) nor the catastrophic collapse of the steel industry in the 1980s. It is a world without government institutions, without politics (the mayor only appears ceremonially opening a sports hut) even without an economy (beyond a few antique farms, shops and a charming veteran car restoration business). The only class conflict hinted at is with the aristocratic rich (who like the American Indian, having been safely liquidated, can be the object of nostalgic regret). Pictures of children are prominent, for example on the cover and the first photo and in the school and people sections. The ambiguity of the dating and dress suggest that these could be our grandparents', parents' or even our own childhood (in reality it is that of others'). This stresses the continuity of the suburb simply as a place where children grow up happily, go to school, visit a corner shop and others travel through. The book is rather like a composite family album, pooled from many families and offered up to the reader to appropriate for their own pseudo family history. Like all family photographs it "situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology of the family as institution and projects a screen of familial myths between camera and subject." (Hirsch 1997:11). Through the familial gaze we might vicariously engage with the signs of family life these 'mutually constitutive' relationships, looks and glances 'traversed by desire and defined by lack' (ibid). The family feel is not surprising, for the origins of many of the photos are precisely in family albums, photos shot by local families: of the house, sports day at school, a church fete - with a few items that could have been clipped from a local newspaper. It enacts the separation of family life from wider social pressures in a suburban quarter. There is no sense of wider social or economic processes shaping the family or life chances.

This way of representing Crosspool can be considered as an archetypal example of the construction of Sheffield as a 'City of Villages' –"a place that, despite its size, has retained the feel of a series of interconnected villages making up the whole" (Street 2010). Hence the appeal of these imagined communities, separately perceived; there is licence and desire for a re-imagined and humanised (familiarised) if indistinct, facet of the collective past.

Lambert (2006) argues that while 'descriptive' genealogy seeks to construct well documented, authenticated accounts of family history, equally important are "narrative and experiential" engagements, which are emotionally significant identifications through visiting particular places or touching objects also touched by an ancestor. These are personally very significant encounters, even if they go beyond the evidence as it would be interpreted by a historian. Photos can also play a part in imagining the character of an ancestor and establishing a powerful sense of connection to that person. Hanson can be seen as offering easy access to a collective pseudo family history. The problem is perhaps not its lack of literal truth, more that it is an inherently effortless and safe engagement with a history. The effort required to research one's own history, the disappointments of gaps in

evidence and the risk of discovering uncomfortable or even disturbing truths that are present in real genealogy (Guelke & Timothy 2008), are simply excluded from Hanson's myth.

Having suggested that underlying the book is a then-now narrative, something of the quality of the visual image defies such a stable ordering. Photography atomises reality, invites the arbitrary recombination of images and actually makes the past opaque (Sontag 1977, 23). Photographs seem to wish to be pulled out of context and repurposed. The variable qualities of photo (from poor amateur to journalistic) and multiple types of image (photo, postcard, drawing) in the book limit our ability to read them as a coherent collection and defy the anyway loose explicit structure that Hanson (2003) presents them in, producing a sense of fragmentation. It is difficult to read the book through because it is a series of snapshots, without an explicit narrative drive, beyond the implicit then- now contrast. So the book is a rather unstable construction, partly because of the nature of photos, partly because of the nature of the suburb as a non-place (e.g. in Vaughan et al 2009). A suburb always relies on what is happening elsewhere, on the fate of the economy which employs the commuting wage earners. People are always passing through and moving away. This space of flows is beyond the boundaries of the local, so can be excluded within the genre.

Attercliffe

Crosspool's pseudo family history may be typical of the representation of the wealthier suburbs. But this vision is scarcely representative of all Sheffield's history: particularly its immediate urban, industrial past. To explore these the authors looked for similar visual local histories on Sheffield's "East End" with its industrial past and strong working class communities (surviving at least until the 1960s). As has been suggested, these are neglected within the Tempus series, but one example published by a local Sheffield publisher, Pickard, is *Attercliffe: a wander up the 'Cliffe* (Liversidge 2003). The purpose and quality of the book is quite different. His compilation of photos and text, combines personal memories, a small amount of historical research (e.g. Liversidge 2003, 54) and a directory structure to describe Attercliffe's shops and pubs particularly in the 50s and 60s. The inspiration for the work was looking at a 50s trade directory and not being able to recall the businesses described triggering a sense of loss (Liversidge 2003, 5). So the work is fairly specifically located in a period of living memory, at a time when Attercliffe was still a populous suburb, by many accounts, a vibrant working class community, before its clearance in the 1960s and the catastrophic failure of the steel industry in the subsequent two decades. The result is a work that follows the format of a directory, detailing premises along a road. Thus a type of historical document partly governs the shape of the writing. Yet personal anecdotes act as a leaven to what could be a dry listing of local businesses and shops. Thus Liversidge mixes very personal anecdotes primarily of childhood and in early working life, of particular shops, of playing football and visiting pubs, with factual material. It is a rather male viewpoint (as this list of activities suggests), and written with much humour. The small details of his and his family's life, such as buying furniture on credit, fishing and football, were probably such general experiences that for a particular local audience they have a powerful resonance. At times he is open about the subjectivity of his account, as when he writes "I recall with no real authority" (Liversidge 2003, 60). It is interesting for the way that

a purely personal account is seen as valid. Opportunities to check facts or seek other sources of authority are positively resisted.

Notwithstanding his claim that the “pictures stand on their own merits” (Liversidge 2003, 5), actually the photos are very much subordinated to the text. The photos are rather small, and are mostly presented within the flow of the text. The weight of text and the way that the photos lack the integrity of their own border, increase our sense that these are less documents in their own right than illustrations of the argument in the text. They are mostly of buildings, with some pictures of the author’s friends and sometimes particular shopkeepers. None of the images are dated. On an image on page 71 an advert for his own work has been edited into an advertising display, suggesting a playful disrespect of the truth and integrity of the photograph. The larger photos and pictures are chiefly paintings and drawings by local artists, further detracting from a sense that the illustrations might be read as factual.

Liversidge (2003) is aware that he may be seen as presenting a rose tinted view of the life of Attercliffe, through focusing on leisure related activities, such as shopping and pub going. In the introduction he refers to

Those big black steel firms, that seemed to be at the end of every Attercliffe Street. Dangerous places. (Liversidge 2003, 5)

In fact it is quite easy to miss these looming presences in the photos as presented and there is only one photo from inside a works (Liversidge 2003, 45). The author acknowledges the limitation, but then moves quickly on. It is as if the awareness of the dangerous and tiring burden of work is to be repressed. But it may be simply reflect the failure of contemporaries to realise the point of recording how things were so that there are few photos of workplaces.

Liversidge does, however, focus on a staggering array of images of distant and more recent past, the images are presented with lovingly blurred outlines (see figures 1 and 2). The affect of Liversidge’s avalanche of borderless archive images of communal points is not only to make them permeable to the texted stories but to convey a convincing warmth, intimacy and nostalgia.

Whereas Hanson offers resources for a fictional family past, Liversidge is concerned to recapture the happier aspects of a world of his own past, of childhood and early adult hood. Such memories are always tinged with a sense of loss, but an added level of emotion arises here from the way that even the material world in which this part of his life happened has disappeared. It is interesting the way that the working class experience seems more truly lost and unavailable, whereas the middle class vision of Hanson, though in a sense more factitious, continues to be accessible. Hanson’s work is less personal more concerned with delineating the historical contours of place and the genealogy of the area; its family dynasties and the past and present measured up alongside one another. Hanson’s work prefigures the obsession with examining the past remains alongside the present; seeing the previous incarnations of local streets and their lost architectural features with (pre-programmed geo-spatial information downloaded as an app in a mobile device). Liversidge’s work has a more anecdotally dialectical approach, the sense of place is immanent and personal, following the unpredictable trajectory of memories he suggests a less orderly ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1983).

Another attempt to represent the experience of the “East End” of the city is *An east end camera* (Wrigley 2006). Wrigley’s book consists of his own photographs taken from the 60s to the 80s, with also old photos and postcards. They are all of buildings and streets that no longer exist, the audience being those who do remember: “Developers who clear the stones cannot also clear memories. As we get older we often recall more clearly our distant past than recent events. [...] In an age when we are told never to look back [...] I say we older ones have had the best of it and they can’t take that away from us.” (Wrigley 2006, 1)

In fact, to others, the book is almost unreadable, for it seems to have no chronological, thematic or spatial order. As the index makes clear there is no very rigorous spatial order (cf Liversidge 2003) though some related photos are clustered. His own photos are mixed with older ones in no sort of temporal order, e.g. 28 is from 1930, 29 is from 1960s, 30 (Unknown), 31 1974, 32 is 1988, 33 is 1981, 34 date is unstated. There is no thematic ordering, except that perhaps some of the more interesting photos occur at the beginning. Coloured photos fill the central pages, probably for technical reasons. Perhaps there is a pattern known to Wrigley and that can be discerned by a more knowing reader, but it defied the author of this paper. The principle of selection seems merely to represent scenes that have now been destroyed, but with a preference for previously unpublished images.

One can have some sympathy with Wrigley’s enterprise, for example it is arguably socially more healthy than the “Lost houses” genre which tries to chart lost country homes of the upper classes (e.g. Neave & Waterson 1988). Yet if the photographs lack order, they also resist any reading of them as “art”. Few of the photos have much technical merit or are particularly interesting. For example, 31 is a banal image of a car turning at traffic lights with a few blurry figures in the foreground and in the background a row of shops and a bus. Perhaps the choice of picture is simply about authenticity, the photograph’s very lack of apparent purpose being proof of its authenticity, and this enough for it to be thought to have a value. The third picture in the book is a remarkably indeterminate image of a non-place, a “passage somewhere between Amberley Street and Janson Street”. We see an alley way, a parked car. A large building in the background is tentatively identified by the caption. This is essentially a space between buildings many of which themselves no longer exist, thereby also abolishing the pictured negative space. The reader’s mystification arises partly because it is rarely explained why the photographs were originally taken. One exception is that Wrigley does reproduce two photos that were the results, he explains, of his looking for the gibbet used to hang a famous local highwayman. He explains that the search, conducted in 1962, was unsuccessful because the gibbet had been recently removed from its spot, dumped by a wall and then finally disposed of. We are given a photo of where the gibbet had once stood and a photo of the place where it had been dumped temporarily. But by the time of the photo, of course, there is nothing in either place. The nostalgic frisson comes from the fact that now not even the streets where the gibbet had been exist. In some sense this does touch a poetic sense of the ungraspability of the past.

Unlike Liversidge’s, Wrigley’s (2006) commentary is banal, never more than a few sentences, sometimes recounting relevant facts (e.g. date of building of Banners department store, 25), jokes (e.g. about a bicyclist getting under a bridge (21)) or trite moralising:

Note the price of a packet of 10 cigarettes in 1965 3/6 (17p). This makes cigarettes 15 times more expensive than they were then. You could never find a savings account to equal such a rise - thus does inflation eat away at savings and encourage us to spend, spend, spend.

The captions are often placed on the photo itself, intruding the banal commentary directly, and disrupting further any attempt to read the photographs aesthetically.

Inadvertently, Wrigley does convey the way that the past is largely ungraspable through imagery, as both Sontag (1977) and Sekula (1999) have argued. This does not make it an enjoyable or even comprehensible read, lacking the structure Liversidge (2003) finds in the street directory and his more rounded self revelation, but the author's lack of control allows the inherent incomprehensibility of the photographic record to reveal itself.

The industrial past

Like Hanson (2003, 2010), neither book on the East End dwells on working life. In search of some treatment of this aspect of Sheffield's history, we turn to Hamilton's (2000) book on a steel company, Firth Brown. Whereas many of the books in Tempus' *Images of England* series are multi-source photo works that construct the history of a specific locality, Hamilton is relatively unusual in being about a particular company. The localness of the topic is stressed by the sub-title "A Sheffield steel company" (though some images are not from Sheffield). The book is very largely based on photos taken by the firm's own photographic unit, which operated between the 1930s and 70s (Hamilton 2000, 6). The range of topics covered by the unit is stressed and the decision to produce the publication is further justified by the claim that the archived collection is of "national importance". The validity of constructing a history of the company from one source is underwritten by the supposedly objective character of photography itself. In truth, the viewpoint available from this one source is radically circumscribed by the nature of the source, both its largely promotional purposes and its very limited time frame. The style of captioning reinforces a sense of objectivity, however, by its focus on precise dates, locations and names of people pictured, for example:

A tube and drum produced for a carpet company in Melbourne, Australia, April 1955. The man in this photograph is Arthur Pugh. (Hamilton 2000, 58)

Such information guides us to read the picture as of a concrete event being documented. Unlike the other books discussed here the photos in Hamilton are often very precisely dated. The information may or may not be useful to us as readers, but by focussing purely on facts it reinforces the impression that the photographs can be read as objective documents. The withdrawal from any commentary projects a fastidious concern with the factual that evades the truth that the archive has itself been produced for specific purposes and interests, illustrating Sekula's (1999) point about the replacement of interpretation by representation. The seductive, apparent indexicality of images in Hamilton present a rationalist account which largely removes the production process from the lives of individual workers stressing the monumental scale of the production process and detailing a litany of heroic successes dependent on *skill* of workers, but with no mention of the everyday realities of those who worked in these environments.

There is no real consideration in Hamilton of how or why the images reproduced were created. Thus the section on the photographic unit itself is postponed to page 95 and the text never seeks to capture anything of the purposes or terms of reference of the unit, merely to describe when it was set up and who was a member. By settling on a descriptive, seemingly factual presentation of photos, processes of interpretation are cut off.

The book is divided into 10 sections and an introduction. The introduction is entirely textual, and unlike either of Hanson's books the sections all have a fairly dense textual introduction. The first chapter, "Thomas Firth and John Brown", is about the founders of the company and the company history is the only one that draws on images from outside the photographic archive, using line drawings of the two founders, adverts of early products and a dramatic lithograph from the *Illustrated London News*. Perhaps the choice of type of representation can be seen as mirroring the mythologizing of the founding fathers of a company. It implies that this is a past that can only be imagined, whereas the period covered by the book can be directly experienced, through photos. "Making steel", chapter 3, produces dramatic photographs of blast furnaces, but which still fail to capture the sublime horror, noise, heat of the industry. The 'Shaping steel' section contains the most authentic feeling images of work, in contrast to the staged rather static imagery of the next two sections 'Products' and 'Firth Vickers and Stainless Steel'. The final chapter, 'Staff, Visitors, Exhibitions and Pantomimes', as the title suggests, is a rather miscellaneous section of pictures, enacting a sort of release from the disciplined order of work at Firth Brown, but also within the book. Pictures of sports teams predominate.

The ordering of the work by theme obscures historical change. The ordering is rather unhistorical, with little sense of how things might have been different at different times, e.g. some passing reference is made to changes in the labour force during World War Two, but essentially there is little evidence of development of the business in the imagery itself. The story of the firm is further incomplete, for though we are given its pre-history, nothing is said of its decline, fall and disappearance.

There is a tension between the purpose of the editor who is attempting to construct a systematic account of the company and the character of the archive itself, which is a collection based on many purposes, most of which we can only guess at, a context which is lost (Sontag 1977, 106). To a certain extent one can use internal evidence to suggest a possible purpose that was in the mind of the photographer. Within the 'shaping steel' section there are a range of types of photograph. For example, the subject matter (women workers), inferior focus and informality of composition suggest that 38 was for news or official propaganda purposes. 35 represents a genre of workshop interiors. 44 or 47 convey heroic figures of men at work (to quote the title of Hine's most famous 1930s photo book). It is difficult to understand how these various images fitted organisational need at the time. Whereas many individuals are named on the photos, these seem to be mostly management figures. The individual workers in 44 or 47 are unnamed, one could say raising them to the level of Everyman. Arguably the effect of this functions to diminish individual agency and narrative and embellish the working history as pure and on a heroic scale. Elsewhere, and more usually, human figures are primarily used to establish a sense of scale (39). Through the book one can suggest that some are promotional, some artistic (64, 66), some news orientated (38,117), some social documentary (47) others more like personal records (79). The mixing of the forms is disorientating.

This construction of the narrative as factual and its disguise of the lived histories of those who worked there constitutes a semiotic system which focuses considerable time and energy to the elaboration of systems as these are designed to “make the world heavy with meaning” to convert objects to signs (Culler 2002, 46). Yet the nature of myth for Barthes is one in which its socially constructed nature is hidden, and instead it is presented as natural or commonsense.

Particularly the sections on products, stainless steel and research have a strong sense of being promotional images, with a stress on precision engineering, the scientific base and superhuman scale (58, 61). The perfection of the images (e.g. 60) in terms of focus and composition reinforce the claimed quality of the product. This presumably relates to a particular market positioning of the firm at that time. Interestingly, the scale of plant and machinery is often stressed, but we rarely get a sense of a mass workforce - just as contemporary street photography rarely captures a sense of the crowd. Often the photos capture record sizes of products, mirroring an imperial discourse of record production figures. Of course, this is in contrast to some experiences of steel making, which took place in conditions that were “dark, dank, dirty, smelly, dangerous” (BBC Radio 2 2006). Photos cannot easily capture the smell, deafening sound and dirt. “Here are official pictures, matter-of-factly committed to the charting and celebration of progress.” (Sekula 1999, 191)

Sekula suggests that there is a tendency to read such photographs either as neutral documents or as art. Some of the images that use the trope of repeated shapes (e.g. 64, 65) or mirror contemporary sculpture (66) seem to invite a primarily aesthetic response. There are some very powerful heroic images of work (e.g. 44, 47). For Sekula if taken as art there is either a need to place the works in the romantic discourse of the auteur by claiming that the photographer is an artist (there is a nod towards this in some of the photographic unit section) or take them as “found” art, where it is the viewer’s superior taste that discovers the artistry. Perhaps we are being invited to do this in section 5, though this seems to be partly the intention also of the photographer.

The editor invites us to read the book as an objective account of the firm, however, a moment’s thought reminds us of what the choice of source for the book excludes, that could have been supplied from other sources or commented on in the text (e.g. see Farnsworth):

- Strikes and acts of resistance
- Accidents
- The relevance of women’s domestic labour to sustaining male work. The continued exclusion of women in the direct workforce even after World War Two is only briefly mentioned (caption p.19).
- The wealth of the owners in contrast to the relative poverty of the workforce
- Pollution and environmental impact
- Impact of weaponry made by the company
- Colonial and imperial effects

For example, some of the images present workers in high risk tasks, yet accounts of the danger and the accidents are significant by their absence. Ironically when one of the authors of the paper borrowed the book from his local

library the person who served him recounted a series of anecdotes about his family's experiences of working in steel mills and 'the stories which don't get told'. He related how his father would sit at the dinner table with 'big welts' on his face from the burns routinely received. Accidents were frequent. One example was the job of pouring the metal in its molten form and the frequency of spillages with life threatening consequences. Similarly, local history websites like the Sheffield Forum chat pages include strands of discussion about work at Firth Brown. Some of these stories seemed to encapsulate the very mundanity of visions which so easily escape documentation. In one instance a retired worker recalls having encountered a Medical Officer with a limp (who it transpires had himself been the victim of a serious work accident) who was very proficient at removing metal splinters with a pair of long-handled tweezers. The everyday nature of these accidents and injuries seem to suggest a work culture in which injury were commonplace and not to be complained about.

By taking the imagery produced by the company itself at face value, never probing the purposes behind their creation or questioning absences from the record or asking a substantive historical question, Hamilton inadvertently performs history as transparent representation and suppresses interpretation.

Discussion

Each of the examples of picture books chosen here reflect slightly different paradigms of the local history genre, but in each case the narrative use of photographs suggests that a sort of transformation has taken place by which these images, once they are caught up in the web of myth, are "reduced to pure signifying function" (Hartley 1992). Barthes suggests that myth constructs these different codes as mere means to an end. These attempts to present bounded and relatively fixed visual inscriptions about specific areas of a city, do seem to operate through organising principles which are pre-ordained, just as we are expected to read them through the conventions which have been outlined.

One common ground between these works is that where they rely on the primary representation of the past to available historic visual images, they are at the mercy of the limitations of the source. History is immediately foreshortened by the lack of photos or many other types of images from earlier than the mid C19th and usually there is scant material before the fad of postcards in the Edwardian era (Jones 2004). Those who organised the taking of photos, be they corporations or newspapers or families had restricted ideas about what was interesting or appropriate to photograph and what should be kept. As the technologies of reproduction have improved more and more glossy books of local history photos are published. For these to be in any way useful forms of history, clearly they need to always probe into how the source material itself came into existence and open up the process of interpretation. The very nature of photographs, however, in contrast to many texts, is that they can survive shorn of any way of recovering the context of their production. They are frequently authorless and dateless. The photographer him or herself is always standing behind the picture, out of sight. Photographs are easy to see as simply presenting the past as it was.

Morley and Robins write hopefully of a localism based on “choice, decision and variability” but photographic local histories seem to epitomise the way that Glocal capitalism, working with Enterprise culture creates false local identities “centred around the creation of an image, a fabricated world, inauthentic identity, a false aura” (1999: 346) specifically an “introverted and nostalgic historicism and heritage fixation” (350). Hanson (2003, 2010) fences off a safe suburb from the wider world and Hamilton (2000) recreates a safe corporate self mythology. There is a potentially genuine emotion in Liversidge’s (2003) exploration of a world lost both through his own growing up and housing clearance and industrial decline, but he evades it with humour and his focus on facts. Given the realities of industrial decline, dispersal of Attercliffe’s population and migration, this also seems a past that will soon be lost. If we were to imagine a work about a locality to satisfy Morley and Robins, it would have to be about the present and future as well as interpretations of the immediate and distant past, by both genders, ethnic and class groups; it would have to be about the specific ways wider forces and geographical flows are worked out locally rather than about some simply bounded space and acknowledging conflict; it would need to be multimodal rather than rely solely on available imagery.



Fig. 1 The Globe Picture Hall, Attercliffe Common (in Liversidge p37) 1914



Fig. 2 Attercliffe Mart, second hand dealer (in Liversidge p31) 1970



Fig. 3 Skating at Crosspool 1904 (in Hanson p4)



Fig. 4 Bus outside premises of Harry S Ranson, grocer and post office 1927 (in Hanson p10)

There is some sense that the use of historical images is now evolving online. On the online photo sharing web site, Flickr, the BBC (2010) invites photographers to “turn back time” by juxtaposing old and new photos of their local high street. Historypin.com does something similar with old photos organised in relation to Google streetview. But a new genre of photography “looking into the past” references the then and now genre through the photographer holding up a past image against the present scene to create a new combined image (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/lookingintothepast/>). This illustrates the refashioning of familiar genres through “vernacular creativity” (Burgess 2009). Rather than only consuming, the Flickr group invites users to create their own new imagery. The meme has been further refashioned by Streetmuseum, the Museum of London’s mobile phone app that allows you to see an image of your current location (calculated using GPS) as it appeared in the past (<http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/MuseumOfLondon/Resources/app/you-are-here-app/index.html>). Although user created content is not included in this case, the phone application expands the potential audience to younger users and the choice of imagery, such as Emmeline Pankhurst chained to the railings of Buckingham Palace suggest subversive possibilities. Thus the genres and memes of local history representation still have life to reach new and active audiences. More fundamentally, mass photography will change what is available in the archive. Although still influenced by convention, the range of what is photographed has and continues to expand. As the 60s, 70s, 80s and onwards become history, enter the archive, the diversity of imagery and range of engagements with the past will also expand.

These reconfigurations of the temporal traces surely have profound consequences for the meaning and experience of place. They offer new ways to re-use the traditional genealogy of place identity and even the more quirky and individualistic treatments contribute to the accumulated semiotic resource which make up the myth of a place. As De Certeau (1983: 160) suggests: “Stories about places are makeshift things. They are composed of the world’s debris... the materials (all the rhetorical details of their ‘manifestations’) are furnished by the leftovers from nominations, taxonomies, heroic or comic predicates, etc., that is, by fragments of scattered semantic places.”

Thus pictorial books are part of the accumulated stories; richly indexical, at times misleadingly authoritative, ideologically blinkered, and at others more honestly solipsistic, through which we as fellow travellers/readers mediate our sense of place.

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Images

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Fig. 4 Bus outside premises of Harry S Ranson, grocer and post office – reproduced with permission from Picture Sheffield, Local Studies, Central Library, Sheffield

