

MAGNUS JACKSON AND THE BLACK ART

This article is a brief account of the life and work of Magnus Jackson, photographer in Perth. Magnus left a unique legacy in the form of around 2,500 glass photographic negatives, which capture life in Perth and Perthshire between the late 1850s and 1890.

Magnus was born in Perth on 25 September 1831, the son of Thomas Jackson and Helen Miller. He had three brothers and three sisters. Two brothers were named Thomas, born in 1830 and 1837 respectively, which suggests that the first died young. Thomas Jackson, the father, had established his business as picture frame maker, looking glass manufacturer, oil painting restorer and print seller in Perth about 1826. From at least the 1830s he worked from 70 George Street, and from at least the 1850s the Jacksons' home was in Bridge Lane, at the back of the business. Thomas's eldest son James took over the business in the late 1840s and then James was eventually succeeded by his brother Magnus. Magnus continued to run the carving and gilding business even after his health had begun to fail, right up until his death in 1891.

Magnus served an apprenticeship with his father but in the 1850s he travelled to London and trained in the new art of photography. After three years he returned home to Perth and by 1860 he had set up a photographic studio in Marshall Place, on the site of what is now St Leonard's in the Fields and Trinity Church. In 1884, he moved his business and studio to much grander premises at 62 Princes Street which he had had built. A property deed of July 1883 records that Magnus paid £500 to a

Miss Anna Ross of 71 Princes Street, Perth. (1) Possibly this was in payment for the land for his new studio, at any rate his first entry in the Perth Trades Directories for Princes Street is in 1884.

He married in Perth in December 1859, and he and his wife Jessie Christie lived in three rooms in Bridge Lane, but as their fortunes increased, so they moved to more comfortable houses in James Street and then Scott Street. Magnus bought no. 30 James Street for £311 in December 1870, although the family had already been living there for some years. Magnus and Jessie had three children, two sons and a daughter: Thomas born in 1861, Catherine Stewart born in 1863, and Magnus born in 1865. One intimate piece of correspondence still exists, a letter from Jessie in St Andrews to Magnus in Perth. Mrs Jackson, as she formally signs her letter to her husband, is taking a holiday in Fife with their son Thomas. The weather is hot and the little boy has enjoyed splashing in the sea. Magnus is planning to join them and Jessie reminds him not once but twice about the need to be in time for his train. All three of the Jackson children were to be trained in the art of photography by their father. The 1881 Census records the family at 59 Scott Street as being Magnus senior, age 49, Jessie, 49, Thomas, photographer, age 19, Catherine Stewart, photographer, age 17 and Magnus, scholar, age 15. The sons, Thomas and Magnus junior, ran their father's business when his health began to fail and for a short while after his death. They traded from 62 Princes Street as T & M Jackson from 1891. By 1893 only Magnus junior was working and he continued until about 1898, when the Jackson family photography business in Perth finally folded and Burrows Brothers, photographers, moved into the premises. Thomas continued to work as a photographer, not in Scotland but in South Africa, where he emigrated in

1897, and settled down to married life with Adelaide Sarah Grove, an emigrant from London.

Magnus senior began his photographic career in the early 1850s, soon after the introduction of two new photographic processes. In 1839 a Frenchman named Daguerre launched his *Daguerreotype* process. This was based on sensitising a silvered and polished copper plate and gave a direct positive image. The daguerreotype process could produce a crisp detailed image, but it had its limitations. The daguerreotype had to be held at a certain angle so as to reflect a dark ground against which the image is seen as a positive, and each daguerreotype was unique so copies could only be made by copying the original through the camera again, a time consuming business. In 1840 another process was announced which marked the true beginning of modern photography. An Englishman named Fox Talbot developed a process which, like the daguerreotype, used the light-sensitive properties of silver salts, but this image was captured as a negative on high quality sensitised paper, thin enough to be translucent and capable of being printed many times. The printing was done by placing the negative in contact with further sheets of sensitised paper, and then laying it in a printing frame in daylight to produce a positive print. This 'calotype' process, as Fox Talbot called it, was then used and improved upon by other photographers. The calotype negative also had its limitations; the clarity of the image could still be improved. In 1851 a photographer named Scott Archer succeeded in coating glass, not paper, with a chemical mixture called collodion, dipping it in silver nitrate and then exposing it in the camera while it was still wet. The plates captured superbly detailed images and printed well on a

new type of printing paper, which used egg white to bind the light-sensitive silver salts to the paper. The collodion process also used fairly short exposures of a few seconds up to a minute or two depending on conditions. Magnus adopted the wet collodion process for his work. It combined a high quality of image with the ability to produce extra prints. The results were worthwhile but the process demanded a great deal of effort and skill. As the plates had to be exposed while still wet, they had to be prepared on the job. Magnus had to carry a heavy camera and tripod and his own mobile dark room wherever he went. His dark room was a tent. This is his description of it:

'It is an ordinary trunk three feet long, eighteen inches deep, and of the same width as depth. I have it so arranged that three small wheels can be attached. The cloth or covering is supported by four wooden rods fitted into the corner of the trunk. The inside is fitted so as to hold all that is necessary for a weeks work on 10 x 12 plates.'

(2)

He used this dark room for fifteen years as it was

'... very convenient for getting into woods ... and along the footpaths adjoining the policies of mansion houses in the country.' (3)

But admitted

'It has only one fault: when packed ready for a journey the weight is something terrible, few being able to take a hand in flinging it on to the cleat of the dog cart, and

many a railway official is surprised at its weight when called on to assist in removing it' (4)

'I always make it a rule to have everything in first-rate working order ... there are plenty of difficulties to contend with without having chemicals out of order or having dirty glass' wrote Magnus. (5)

The steps he took to make a negative were, first, to clean and polish the glass plate. Then, holding the glass by one corner so as not to mark it, he carefully poured the collodion solution on to the plate, which he tilted gently so that it flowed evenly across the surface. After sensitising it by dipping it in silver nitrate, he loaded the wet plate into a wooden holder to protect it from the light, then put the holder with the plate into his camera, and withdrew the cover. Finally, he took his photograph by simply taking off the lens cap. Experience taught him for how long to leave off the cap. After re-inserting the cover into the holder, he took both plate and holder out of the camera. Inside his dark tent he poured pyrogallic acid over it. The image appeared very quickly and, when he considered it had developed enough, Magnus rinsed the plate with clean water. This stopped the chemical developing the image any further. He could then store the plates in grooved zinc boxes until he had time to finish them. When that time came, still keeping his plate in the dark, and by the light of a candle, Magnus fixed the image by immersing it in hyposulphite of soda. When photographers worked in the dark and emerged with dark stained fingers, small wonder that photography was dubbed 'The Black Art'. The plate was then thoroughly washed and the surface protected by a coat of varnish. That care and

attention to the preparation and varnishing of his plates has ensured that most of Magnus's remaining negatives are still in excellent condition over a century later.

Magnus's obituary in the *Perthshire Constitutional* newspaper of 27 April 1891 notes that he was known across Scotland as a first-rate landscape photographer. One of his main interests was certainly the photography of trees. He wrote:

'Tree photography is one of the most interesting as well as one of the most healthful pursuits that anyone could follow' (6)

Magnus read a paper to the Dundee and East of Scotland Photographic Association entitled 'Photography Outside the Studio'. Published in two parts in both *The Photographic News* and the *British Journal of Photography* in January and February 1881 respectively, it gives an extraordinarily detailed, honest and often humorous account of his methods and experiences. It is also an intriguing insight into the man's character and objectives.

In an era without rapid and convenient transport and communication Magnus had to be prepared for all eventualities. He made it a point to carry everything he needed, including a full set of eight lenses with his 12x12 camera.

'In photographing trees (say) from sixty to eighty feet high I always use a lens capable of covering a 15 x 12 plate, so as to get good definition on a 10 x 12 plate, provided there be room to work a lens of that length of focus.' (7)

Stillness was what Magnus needed for his tree photography: no wind, no movement of any kind. He must have been an extraordinarily patient man:

'...with trees, as single specimens, unless they are sharp, clear, and well-defined throughout they are worthless as works of art.' (8)

Magnus's concerns were stillness, detail and light. 'Trees - such as ash, beech, elm, etc., among the deciduous trees, and deodar hemlock, spruce, and albertiana among the pines – require very careful watching. If attention be not given to take advantage of a lull in the wind the plate will be lost. I have been defeated day after day in not being able to secure one single specimen; but as my motto is "never give in" to defeat, I persevere till success attends my efforts... In exposing, as well as in developing, my aim is always to get detail in the darkest parts of my picture, or, in other words, the deepest shadows.' (9)

A number of Magnus's remaining plates include carefully posed and placed figures which add to the interest of the scene as well as giving a sense of scale.

'A figure or figures should be introduced, where practicable, into all pictures; but this takes up a good deal of time, and much care and study is required in the arranging of the figures with artistic taste and feeling... Many good pictures are ruined by the disposition of a single figure.' (10)

Magnus was certainly committed to his art, travelling far afield and working at anti-social times of the day to capture the best pictures. He recorded photographing trees in Dunkeld at 4 o'clock in the morning. Where the shape of the tree itself wasn't as perfect as it might be, Magnus was not averse to pruning or lopping, and his tip to fellow photographers was to carry 'A good-sized pruning knife'. (11) By 1884 he held the office of photographer to the Scottish Arboricultural Society, and in that same year he was presented with the highest award at the International Forestry Exhibition in Edinburgh for his photographs of trees. In 1886 he was awarded the

Bronze Medal and Diploma of Merit at the International Exhibition of Industry, Science and Art in Edinburgh for his photographs of ferns and foxgloves. In 1887 one of Magnus's studies of foxgloves and ferns was presented to well-known Perth citizen, Andrew Coates, by the committee of Perth Public Swimming Baths.

Interior photography, in spite of the lack of breezes, also posed challenges for Magnus because of the problem of light – too much, too little, too intense, or too diffuse. He tried to control daylight from windows by drawing the curtains or otherwise covering them while he began to take the shot, then he uncovered them and let daylight in for a few seconds. His aim was to balance the exposure and get a clear view through the window. He used mirrors re-positioned or tilted at angles to reflect light into dark areas. Lighted candles and magnesium flash powder were also available to him as additional light sources.

'The exposure varies very much - from ten or fifteen minutes to an hour and a half. For dimly-lighted interiors an hour is about the average time required.' (12)

Magnus had a sense of humour and a well-developed sense of respect for animal subjects. Horse, cattle and dog owners and breeders were among his clients. Regarding cattle, he writes,

'My first attempt in this line was in the year 1856, and in two days I made somewhere about twenty fine, rich-looking negatives... the gentleman who was the owner of the cattle... admitted the quality of the work to be good, but not one was a good picture of any of the animals. This to me was very disgusting...' (13)

Magnus had taken good photographs but he had not produced a flattering likeness of the animal's best features for the breeder. After his first attempts to photograph cattle Magnus always made a point of having them well cleaned, especially their feet, which he felt needed to be as sharply detailed as the rest of the beast. He also appears to have been circumspect and confident in dealing with clients and, more especially, their employees. Of cattlemen he noted:

'I endeavour to impress the men in charge with the idea that I am familiar with the work. This goes a great way in gaining their confidence, and they do whatever I tell them with alacrity.' (14)

With horses and their grooms Magnus was even more diplomatic.

'Grooms... are not so easily managed as cattlemen; they nearly every one of them think they know more about horses than any other body ... If he be the least out of temper... you are sure to fail in your attempts, as it requires all the care possible on the part of the groom as well as the photographer.' (15)

His method of photographing a restless horse was to draw a line on the ground, ask the groom to give the horse a trot then bring it up to the line, and stand. At that point Magnus would be ready to take the photograph before either horse or groom became restless again. Also:

' Morning is the right time to take this class of subject. If you attempt it in summer at mid-day you are almost certain to fail, owing to flies;' (16)

He mentions photographing dogs only briefly, possibly because the recollections were too painful to remember.

"Many a time I have had to defend myself from their attacks with my camera-stand in one hand and the black cloth in the other. One savage fellow was very nearly making mincemeat of me one day, until I got a piece of beef to give him..." (17)

Clearly, preparation was everything.

Magnus also mentions post-mortem photography in his article, although none of his plates with such a subject have so far come to light. He is brief but gives one tip:

'...have as few of the friends of the deceased in the apartment as possible. (18)

Although his work in the darkroom and in the field was very often solitary, Magnus was a gregarious man as his active membership of groups, societies and committees testifies. For instance he was elected a member of the Perthshire Society of Natural Science, a society devoted to the study of local natural history, in 1877. In 1879 he was elected to a committee to form a museum for the PSNS to be built in Tay Street, Perth. In 1880 he was elected to the Council of the PSNS, and he read a paper to the society on one of his favourite subjects, 'Some Remarkable Perthshire Trees'. From 1882 to 1884 he held the office of Vice President chairing meetings on occasion, and in 1883 he exhibited 'a piece of larch from a tree which had been struck by lightning'. (19)

He was a supporter of the Literary and Antiquarian Society of Perth and bequeathed a brass candlestick to their collections. The candlestick was allegedly given to one of Magnus's forebears, Magnus the Miller, by William Wallace, and is still in the collections of Perth Museum and Art Gallery. By the 1880s he was also on the Council of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

In 1878 Magnus, already a Burgess of Perth, was elected Town Councillor for the First Ward of Perth and so began the busiest chapter of his life: running the old family business of carving and gilding and his own commercial photography business, and pursuing his personal interests in photography, history and natural history, not to mention the Guildry Incorporation of Perth and the local Ambulance Classes. He took great personal interest in Perth's Public Swimming Baths, officially opened in May 1889, and became one of its directors, only resigning eventually due to ill health. By 1885 he was appointed a Police Commissioner for Perth under the General Police and Improvement (Scotland) Act, 1862, overseeing the police, street lighting and fire services. He was Convener of the Inches, Cleansing and Sanitary, Law, Finance and Slaughter House Committees of the Town Council. He spent time checking that sewers and streets were properly cleaned and maintained and that the Slaughter House was being properly managed. He oversaw the paving of County Place and in December 1885 he met with others in Perth City Hall to decide the location of a public urinal. Magnus was obviously delighted with the outcome of the latter because he made a point of photographing the elaborate iron edifice once it had been erected at South Street Port. He also served on the Town Council's Gas and Water Commissions and Burial Grounds Committees. In 1887 he was a member of a committee which dealt with a boat carrying cholera victims and found a safe mooring place which allowed treatment for and isolation of the patients. Magnus continued to serve on the Town Council and take an active interest in Perth's affairs for the rest of his life. A major public figure as well as a photographer of note, Magnus's access to information about events, developments and changes in Perth and Perthshire is one of the reasons why the subject matter of his negatives is so important for local history, for example his emotive scene of ruined buildings and

their inhabitants in Shuttlefield Close shortly before demolition and clearance to make way for the extension of Scott Street.

Magnus Jackson, Photographer, Carver and Gilder, and Perth Town Councillor died on 27 April 1891 aged 60. He had been ill for a few years and his obituary in the *Perthshire Constitutional* states that his death was not unexpected. The death certificate records the cause of death as 'senile decay, chronic hepatitis, acute dyspepsia and inanition'. It is likely that he poisoned himself by regularly using the chemical pyrogallic acid, being ignorant of the risks of exposure and without taking adequate care in its use. The Institute of Occupational Medicine identifies pyrogallic acid as pyrogallol, 1,2,3-trihydroxybenzene. Pyrogallol is highly toxic and can be readily absorbed through the skin. Inhalation of the powder can cause acute poisoning with cyanosis (a blueness of the skin), anaemia, convulsions, vomiting and liver and kidney damage. (20) Magnus's chronic hepatitis and acute dyspepsia may well have been caused by uninformed exposure to the chemical. Jessie, his wife, died before him on 18 July 1887 and Magnus lived the last few years of his life a widower, in illness and discomfort. Both are buried in Wellshill Cemetery, Perth, along with Magnus junior who tragically cut his own throat at the age of 31.

The A K Bell Library, Perth, holds two albums of Magnus Jackson's tree photographs, and his glass plates are in the permanent collections of Perth Museum and Art Gallery. Fragile, precious and unique, these plates form the earliest photographic record of life in Perthshire that the museum possesses and they continue to be as popular today as they were when Magnus first developed them.

NOTES

- (1) Bond and Disposition in Security for £500 by Magnus Jackson in favor of Miss Anna Ross, 31st July 1883, General Register of Sasines, 1st August, 1883.
- (2) Jackson, M. Photography Outside the Studio, The British Journal of Photography, February 4, 1881.
- (3) Op. cit. in note (2)
- (4) Ibid.
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) Ibid.
- (7) Ibid.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) Ibid.
- (11) Magnus Jackson, Photography Outside the Studio, The British Journal of Photography, February 11, 1881
- (12) Op. cit. in note (11)
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) Ibid.
- (18) Ibid.
- (19) Proceedings of the Perthshire Society of Natural Science 1881-86, Session 1883-84, November 15th 1883

(20) Shaw, S. Overexposure – Health Hazards in Photography, 1st edit. c.1983