

JULIA
MARGARET
CAMERON

Pioneer Photographer

Joy Melville

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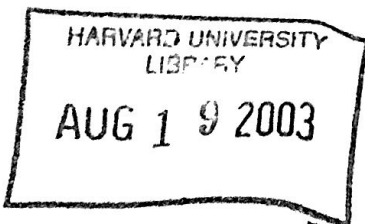
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C H R O N O L O G Y

- 1815 Julia Margaret Pattle born at Garden Reach, Calcutta. Her parents were James and Adeline Pattle.
- 1818 Educated in Europe, in both London and Paris.
- 1834 Returns to Calcutta.
- 1838 Marries Charles Hay Cameron.
- 1839 Her first child, Julia, is born. Five sons were to follow.
- 1843 Cameron is appointed Member of the Council of India. He and his wife become leaders of Anglo-Indian society in Calcutta.
- 1847 Julia's translation of G.A. Burger's *Leonora* is published in London.
- 1848 The family returns to England on Charles Cameron's retirement and moves into a house at Tunbridge Wells, where their neighbour is poet Henry Taylor. Julia is a constant visitor at her sister, Sarah Prinsep's, artistic circle at Little Holland House. She meets the painter G.F. Watts and some Pre-Raphaelites, who are to influence her later photographic work.
- 1850 The Camerons follow the Taylors to London and move near them to Sheen Lodge, East Sheen.

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- Julia's friendship with Alfred and Emily Tennyson begins.
- 1857** A further move to Putney Heath. Mary Ryan, an attractive Irish beggar girl, approaches Julia, who takes her into her household and educates her alongside her own children. Mary later becomes her parlourmaid and model.
- 1860** The Camerons' coffee crop fails in Ceylon and Charles goes to investigate. While he is there, Julia buys two adjacent houses at Freshwater, Isle of Wight, next door to the Tennysons. She calls the property Dimbola. The family moves in.
- 1863** Julia is given a camera by her daughter, to alleviate her loneliness while her husband again visits Ceylon. She becomes a passionate photographer.
- 1864** Her photographs are shown at the Tenth Annual Exhibition of the Photographic Society, in London.
- 1865** Contributes to exhibitions in Scotland, Berlin and Dublin. Many critics are hostile, but at Berlin she is awarded the bronze medal. She mounts a one-woman show at Colnaghi's, Pall Mall, London.
- 1866** Exhibits again at Berlin and is awarded the gold medal. She has a further show at Colnaghi's and at the French Gallery, London. Adopts Cyllena,

Chronology

Melita and Sheridan Wilson, the three orphaned children of the Camerons' friend the Revd Sheridan Wilson.

- 1867 Exhibits in Paris and receives an honourable mention.
- 1868 One-woman show at the German Gallery, London.
- 1873 Julia's daughter dies in childbirth. The lease of Little Holland House is up and the Prinseps and G.F. Watts decide to move to the Isle of Wight.
- 1874 She starts work on illustrations for the first volume of the Cabinet edition of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Disappointed with the reduced size of the photographs, she publishes her own version, with twelve large photographs.
- 1875 Writes a fragment of her autobiography, *Annals of My Glasshouse*, which is not published until 1889. She starts work on the second volume of *Idylls of the King*. In October the Camerons leave England to join their sons in Ceylon. From then on Julia only photographs occasionally.
- 1878 They return for a month's holiday in England.
- 1879 Julia dies on 26 January at her son's house in the mountains of Ceylon and is buried in St Mary's churchyard, Bogawantalawa.
- 1880 Charles Cameron dies and is buried next to his wife.

I N T R O D U C T I O N

The casual gift of a camera from her daughter in 1863 transformed Julia Margaret Cameron's life. She was forty-eight years old and until then her ferocious energy had no real outlet. She took up photography with a passion, breaking the mould of the conventional stiff Victorian portraiture and elevating photography to a high art with her allegorical, biblical and literary images. Her photographic studies, particularly those of 'Famous Men and Fair Women', had a powerful and arresting intensity which outshone other contemporary portraits.

However, her originality, her deliberate and dreamlike soft-focus technique, her dramatic use of lighting and her pictorial imagery, aroused waspish hostility. The *Photographic News*, in reviewing an exhibition of hers in 1868, said: 'Not even the distinguished character of some of the heads serve, however, to redeem the result of wilfully imperfect photography from being altogether repulsive . . .'.

She aroused anger among male photographers by daring to compete professionally with them in an age when women were expected to dabble prettily in the arts but not to challenge the accepted male supremacy.

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Nevertheless, she did have male admirers including Victor Hugo, who wrote: 'No one has ever captured the rays of the sun and used them as you have. I throw myself at your feet.'

She herself shrugged off her critics, confidently organised exhibitions of her photographs, and worked and networked frenetically. She cajoled and bullied her sitters, once leaving Robert Browning posing for two hours while she hunted for some missing equipment. When illustrating Tennyson's Arthurian tales, *Idylls of the King*, she ruthlessly commandeered as a model any passer-by who possessed the face she wanted, and rarely did a potential subject escape.

The seeds of her photographic talent were already evident in her character. She was a formidable, feisty woman. Plain in appearance, she had imaginative curiosity, exceptional verve and drive, steely determination and overwhelming confidence. Yet despite her bohemian, unorthodox behaviour, she also played the role of conventional Victorian wife and upheld many of the ideals of the mid-Victorian age. Born in Calcutta in 1815, she was educated in Europe before returning to India and, at twenty-three, marrying Charles Hay Cameron, a distinguished civil servant twenty years her senior. She became Calcutta's leading hostess, ran the household and produced six children.

Her life changed when her husband retired and the family came to England in the late 1840s. She became

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part of a literary and artistic circle based at her sister Sarah's home, Little Holland House, in London. It included nearly everyone of talent in Victorian London, from Thackeray to Ellen Terry, Carlyle to Rossetti. Many of those she met there she was later to photograph.

She and her husband and family later moved to the Isle of Wight, next door to her dear friend, Tennyson. It was there that Julia Margaret Cameron took up photography. For twelve years she worked furiously – an exceptionally short time for the extraordinary body of work she produced. Then, in 1875, aged sixty, she ungrudgingly gave it all up to accompany her husband to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), an island he loved and where he owned large coffee estates. Her sons were working there and she was to say, 'Where your heart is, there is your treasure also.' She photographed relatively rarely after that and, three years later, while staying with one of her sons in the mountains of Ceylon, she died.

Her vision and artistic treatment were to influence generations of future photographers. Yet after her death astonishingly little attention was paid to her work. Only through dedicated Cameron scholars were her photographs re-evaluated and shown in various exhibitions, allowing their brilliance to be seen once again.

O N E

CALCUTTA DAYS

Calcutta in 1815, where Julia Margaret was born, was a splendid place for the affluent, with its dazzlingly colourful flowers and birds; palatial residences, horse races and cricket matches, picnics and balls, water parties and garden parties, and nightly sunset carriage parades, where the fashionable acknowledged each other on Calcutta's Esplanade.

Julia was one of seven daughters born to James and Adeline Pattle. Adeline, a beautiful and graceful woman, came from a good family. Her father was the Chevalier de l'Etang, a courtier at Versailles during the reign of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette. According to some accounts, he took rather too much interest in the Queen, and was posted out to Pondicherry in French India. There he met and married Thérèse Blin de Grincourt, a one-time maid of honour to Marie Antoinette and renowned for her beauty. He held various responsible posts there but family tradition has it that the couple returned to Paris and the Chevalier was with Marie Antoinette when she was imprisoned and guillotined in 1793. He and his wife left – promptly – for India and by 1800 were established in Calcutta.

Julia Margaret Cameron

When the Chevalier died, or so it is romantically claimed, a miniature of Marie Antoinette was buried with him. His wife returned to France and lived at Versailles until her death in 1866 at ninety-eight years.¹

One of their daughters, Adeline de l'Etang, who had inherited her mother's beauty – as indeed future generations were to do – married an Englishman, James Pattle, in 1811. Born in Bengal, though educated in London, James was accepted into the Bengal civil service at the age of sixteen in 1791.² He was steadily promoted to more senior administrative and judicial posts. At the time of his marriage to Adeline – when he was a judge at the provincial court of Murshidabad on the River Ganges – he was a rich, highly placed civil servant. He appeared to be a pillar of society, but was dubbed by his enemies as 'the biggest liar in India'. His friends regarded him as a bon vivant and generous host who could be relied on to offer excellent claret and tip-top champagne.

The couple's first daughter, also called Adeline, was born in 1812. That year James was transferred to Calcutta and it was there that Julia was born, on 11 June 1815. She was the couple's fourth child. Sadly for them, their one son had died the year of his birth (1813) and their next daughter only lived until she was four. Adeline was to have six more daughters: Sarah (1816), Maria (1818), Louisa (1821), Virginia (1827), Harriet (1828, died the same year) and, last of all, Sophia (1829).

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James and Adeline and their family lived in an impressive residence in an area called Garden Reach on the bank of the River Hooghli, a few miles outside Calcutta. Large houses in that district in those days were raised on a basement some 18 ft high which contained the kitchen, bathroom, storerooms and spare rooms. The reception rooms and the best bedrooms would be in the upper part of the house. Green venetian blinds would give protection from the sun, while broad verandahs overlooked the river. These gave splendid views of the grounds, most of which were 'shaded by the boughs of blossoming mango trees and the spreading banyan'.³

The children of Anglo-Indian families in those days were usually taken by their mother or nurse to Europe from the age of three years upwards. There they stayed until they were eighteen or nineteen. Their educational opportunities there were far better than any schooling they could expect in India and it was a healthier climate than the hot sun and fevers of India.

This meant, for the mother, frequent and tedious five- or six-month voyages to and from India, round the coast of Africa via the Cape of Good Hope, when violent storms could practically upend the ship. Indeed, one of the Pattle children, aged four, died at sea: another was born at sea. Adeline took her children to France in turn to the care of her mother, Madame de l'Etang, in Versailles, and also to London. Adeline and her sisters had been educated in Paris at a select private school run

Julia Margaret Cameron

in those days by a Mrs Campan, a friend of their mother. The Pattle girls may have attended the same school – though, as an adult, Sarah used to complain that she had had no education at all.

Julia was taken to Europe by her mother as a very young child of about three or four years old, around 1818, staying there until she was nineteen. Like her sisters, she was educated in London and Paris. It is a hazy, virtually undocumented period. There are no descriptions of Julia as a child, what schools she went to, or how long she remained in each respective country. But she and her sisters all spent their holidays with their grandmother in Versailles and enjoyed this immensely when they were young. Life for them there was untrammelled – in one of the few remarks she made to a friend about her childhood, Julia said she and her sister Sarah ‘used to wander forth and kneel and pray on the country roadsides’. Madame de l’Etang was unperturbed by this. It was said she ‘solved the problem of education for her granddaughters by having them taught all sorts of housewifely arts, rather to the neglect of lesson-books and accomplishments’.⁴ In line with current thinking, girls were expected to concentrate on making a successful, hopefully brilliant, marriage. Being able to cook, sew and entertain was much more use than a classical education.

The girls’ aunts – their mother’s two sisters, Mrs Edward Impey and Mrs Samuel Beadle – were also

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living in France. While the children were growing up in France, they and their mother, aunts and grandmother often entertained other Anglo-Indian families like the Thackerays. William Makepeace Thackeray also met the Pattle family in London in the early 1830s, as well as in Versailles and Paris. He was particularly taken with the 'ravishing' good looks of the daughters. He pursued the acquaintance and in 1833 wrote wistfully to his mother, saying if only one of the elder daughters had a fortune to match her face, he'd marry her out of hand. Julia did not share in the dazzling looks of her sisters – though her sister Sarah was comely rather than beautiful – but she made an impression on him and in later years in England he brought his daughters to meet her.

Whenever the girls' mother was away on these long trips to Europe, their father, James Pattle, reverted to bachelor behaviour. He was an energetic, influential figure in Calcutta, but lived up to his reputation of being a rogue. Ethel Smyth, the composer, remembered the evening when her father, who had been on the Governor General's staff in Calcutta and knew James well, started to reminisce about him. She said her father remembered him as being 'as big a scamp as ever you saw, and a bad fellow in every way. Behaved very ill to his wife too, but she was devoted to him and when – well, when anything went wrong, he used to say that it *couldn't be helped now* and she was quite satisfied and forgave him again and again.'⁵

Julia Margaret Cameron

Julia returned to India from Europe in 1834, when she was nineteen, to take her part in the social life in Calcutta. There was a shortage of English girls in Calcutta then – indeed at one Government House party two gentlemen had to take in each lady. Another time, one hostess could only muster sufficient dancing partners for sixteen young men. Although soldiers may have looked attractive in their uniform, worldly mothers pointed out firmly to their daughters that a civil servant, with his chances of promotion, was a far better marital prospect.

Julia was not someone who would have been swept off her feet by mere good looks and a uniform. She had a very quick mind, definite ideas and a wide range of interests – preferring a discussion on literature to social chit-chat. Although the family was well off and she would have been regarded as a catch, her looks were not prepossessing. She had penetrating, sharp, dark eyes, a sallow complexion and a wart on her face. Her figure was also inclined to be dumpy. But then, and for the whole of her life, she was generous, unconventional, loyal and unpredictable.

Her health was not very good – she was prone to respiratory infections – and when she was twenty-one, she had a bout of illness and was sent to the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, with its more refreshing climate, to recuperate. There she met two men, one of whom she married, while the other, Sir John Herschel, became her mentor. Herschel was an English

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astronomer who pioneered celestial photography, carried out research on photo-active chemicals, and for relaxation translated from *The Iliad*. In 1834 he had installed an observatory in the Cape to survey the sky of the southern hemisphere.

The other man was Charles Hay Cameron who, like Julia, had gone to the Cape to recuperate. Cameron, born in 1795, was a widower and at forty-one was twenty years older than Julia. He was recovering from an exhausting spell of work in Calcutta where he had been working with Macaulay on writing the Indian Penal Code, a code of criminal law. He was of aristocratic lineage. His mother, Lady Margaret Hay, was a daughter of the Earl of Errol, and his father – descended from the Jacobite, Archibald Cameron of Lochiel – was Governor of Malta, and of the Bahamas.

The three – Cameron, Julia and Herschel – remained close, keeping up an intellectual friendship, sending books to each other and exchanging critical comments on them. They were all interested in the arts: Julia translated, and had published, Gottfried August Burger's poem *Leonora*. Herschel kept them informed about the latest scientific discoveries, including those to do with photography. When Julia herself became a photographer, many years later in 1863, this background and Herschel's knowledge, were invaluable to her.

On 1 February 1838, two years after they met, Charles Cameron and Julia married in Calcutta.

Julia Margaret Cameron

Apart from the two youngest sisters, Virginia and Sophia, all the other Pattle sisters married during the 1830s and all married well. The same year as Julia married Cameron, Louisa married Henry Bayley who was to become Judge of the Supreme Court in Calcutta. A third sister, Maria, had married the highly respected Dr John Jackson in 1835 – the same year that a fourth sister, Sarah, married Thoby Prinsep, a high-ranking administrator.