

# Thomas Glaister and Early Australian Photography

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In common with research into the early photographic history of most colonial societies, attempts to learn more about the photographers who worked in nineteenth-century Australia can be an exasperating exercise. Many of these early practitioners arrived in Australia as immigrants from Europe or America, often intent on concealing their origins, or, more optimistically, simply wanting to establish a new life in a new country without the encumbrances of their own pasts. Despite the technical skill and the cumbersome equipment required to produce early photographic images, many new arrivals in the colony took up photography principally as a

means of making money, either as itinerant country photographers (Jack Cato called Australian photography in the 1840s a 'vagrant process'<sup>1</sup>) or, later in the cities, through studio portraiture and views of colonial streets and buildings. Aesthetic considerations were often secondary to the desire for a 'good likeness' produced in the shortest amount of time.

The most ambitious of these early photographers seemed intent on competing in the technical field, through the introduction of new, usually speedier, processes. Newspapers of the day abound with advertisements for newly imported techniques available only at individual photographers' studios, with florid prose emphasizing the clarity and convenience of these up-to-date procedures. Even the most well established of photographers have left little or no record about their personal background or explicit information about the sources of their artistic training and aesthetic predilections. This situation certainly applies in the case of Thomas Skelton Glaister (1825–1904), by all accounts one of the most skilled photographers, especially as an ambrotypist, active in Australia in the mid-nineteenth century (figure 1). Although Glaister maintained a flourishing studio practice in Sydney for fifteen years, from the mid-1850s until 1870, and frequently advertised his superior abilities in the newspapers of the day, concerted efforts by several scholars to learn the truth about his photographic training, or even his place of birth, yielded little information. A search of newspaper reports indicated that after a fire destroyed his Pitt Street studio in 1870, he simply disappeared from Australia, and no subsequent examples of his photographic production have been substantiated.

One might be led to question the necessity to establish such biographical facts about any photographer; the photographs that survive should speak for themselves. On the other hand, what might be gained by knowing the details of the photographer's life or artistic aspirations? In the case of Glaister, this question becomes particularly compelling for the very reason that his known archive of images is so characteristic and of such a high aesthetic standard. At a time when many photographs were utilitarian at best, in a place where photography's primary purpose was recognized as being a record of person or place, Glaister's images shine through as superior examples of aesthetic composition and, most intriguingly, of psychological characterization. The



*T. S. Glaister*

Figure 1. Photographic portrait of T. S. Glaister, published in *An Illustrated History of Sonoma County California*, Chicago: Lewis Publishing, 1889.



desire to know more about Glaister himself, his source of technical expertise and his aesthetic influences is strengthened when one considers the photographer's own claims to training in the 1840s under the American photographic pioneers, the Meade Brothers of New York City.<sup>2</sup> Such tantalizing clues to his artistic roots lead back to the very beginnings of photography and would certainly place Glaister in a pivotal position in the establishment of a photographic aesthetic in Australia. Happily, the brilliance of Glaister's visual legacy has engendered enough curiosity among photographic historians in Australia to lead at last to some success in uncovering the details of his life. Serendipity, along with the tenacious efforts of photographic collectors, finally led to revelations about Glaister's whereabouts after 1870, thereby establishing as well some solid facts about his early life.<sup>3</sup> These details do provide room for speculation about his aesthetic background, although no direct source for his photographic training has been established.<sup>4</sup>

We now know that Thomas Glaister was born in Cumberland, England, on 12 June 1825, the son of a shipbuilder, a trade he supposedly also learned. He was, according to a biographical sketch in the *Illustrated History of Sonoma California* of 1889, 'quite liberally educated'.<sup>5</sup> In 1849, he married Mrs Elizabeth Metcalfe, widow of Daniel Metcalfe; she already had two children from her first marriage, one of whom established a photography shop in Toowoomba, Queensland, in 1875 with his stepbrother Thomas Skelton Glaister, junior (1851–77).<sup>6</sup> The Glaisters had one other child, Blanche. In 1849, they had emigrated to the United States, where, according to J. M. Gunn's *History of the State of California and Biographical Record of Coast Counties, California*,<sup>7</sup> Glaister worked as a druggist in Chicago and Woodstock, Illinois, and Burlington, Iowa. His biography states that he returned to New York City in 1854, where he learned photography. No direct mention of the Meades appears in this biographical account, although Glaister's return to New York for photographic training makes it quite likely that the brothers, the most prolific photographers then in that city, could have provided such training. After learning this skill and 'full of adventure',<sup>8</sup> he sailed for Australia, where he 'adhered rigidly to his calling, and accumulated considerable money'.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, his biography emphasizes that he was able to charge enormous prices for his photographs in Australia: 'Pictures that brought fifty cents in New York sold for \$5 in Australia'.<sup>10</sup> This attitude coincides with Glaister's assertions in Sydney newspaper advertisements that his photographs were expensive, but of the best quality, and were ones that would never fade.<sup>11</sup> These biographical records consistently maintain that Glaister left Australia in 1869, a year before the fire that destroyed his Pitt Street studio; perhaps again he varied the actual facts for some personal reason, or perhaps he had indeed left Sydney before the fire. In any case, he then settled, having made his fortune through photography, in Sonoma County, California, where he established a prosperous vineyard on an estate of 238 acres known as Green Oaks. While in Sydney, he had exhibited an interest in horticulture,<sup>12</sup> but wine-making had not been one of his accomplishments in Australia. By all

accounts, he was a prominent member of the California community, involved in school and church politics, and active as a Mason (a fraternal affiliation in which he also seems to have participated in Sydney). It appears that he gave up photographic practice entirely once he returned to America. In November 1904, at the age of 79, he was killed in an accident when the horse pulling his carriage bolted at the approach of an automobile. The elaborate account of his death in the Sonoma City newspaper described him as 'a man of sterling worth and integrity of character'.<sup>13</sup> His estate was considerable, with the bulk of his possessions going to his daughter, Blanche Wagner, and his three grandchildren. No photographs or photographic equipment are mentioned as part of his estate.

Such descriptions of Glaister's life and interests greatly extend an understanding of the circumstances and intentions of his Sydney photographic practice. He was obviously an astute businessman as well as a technically adventurous photographer, both skills necessary to thrive in the competitive environment of mid-century Sydney. His many community affiliations, from the Masons to the Congregational Church, substantiate Jack Cato's assumption that Glaister was a member of the society he photographed: 'As he photographed all the leading Clubs and featured pictures of clubmen I expect he was himself one of them'.<sup>14</sup> He was, then, a gentleman and wished to appeal to the highest levels of society through an emphasis on the superiority of his studio facilities, as well as his photographic and artistic skills.

The physical evidence of his technical ability, apparent in the highly polished finish of his images, has always indicated to scholars his knowledge of American practice and products. Gael Newton maintains that American practitioners in mid-nineteenth-century Australia are notable for their emphasis on polished surfaces and finish, and their desire to introduce the most up-to-date methods.<sup>15</sup> That Glaister came to Melbourne in 1854 as an agent of the Meade Brothers company may not be conclusively established, despite his own claims in his earliest advertisements when he set up his Sydney studio in 1855.<sup>16</sup> But his use of American cases for his daguerreotypes, his insistence on the most expensive of finishes and techniques, and his avid introduction of the newest photographic processes speak clearly to an American vision of photography in the production of 'first-class Portraits'. He named his studio, which was considered by all accounts the most well-appointed facility in the city, both Excelsior Gallery and the American and Australian Portrait Gallery, and he frequently touted the variety of his styles of pictures. One need only consider his ambrotype of James Johnson (figure 2), sole survivor of the wreck of the ship *Dunbar*, to appreciate his mastery of technique. The plate itself was 33 × 25 cm, extraordinarily large for the time; that Glaister used plates as large as 43 × 56 cm was advanced enough in 1858 to warrant comment in the *Sydney Magazine of Science and Art*.<sup>17</sup> The plate size, however, was not simply considered a novelty or gimmick used to attract customers. Glaister still took the effort to finish the surface of the portrait with dye-coloured enamels and fine polish, a time-consuming procedure that enhanced the image's clarity. According to Alan Davies,





Figure 2. Thomas S. Glaister, *James Johnson*, survivor of the 'Dunbar', ambrotype, c.1857. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.



Figure 3. Thomas S. Glaister, *Mrs. Jane Day and her daughters Jane, Mary and Eliza*, ambrotype, 1859. Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney.



Curator of Photographs at the Mitchell Library, this enormous plate was on display as part of Glaister's impressive window gallery.<sup>18</sup> The ambrotype was a less expensive process than the earlier daguerreotype and Glaister's subject may have been chosen for topical effect and popular appeal, but the photographer still demonstrated a concern for aesthetic sophistication sometimes lacking in other Australian practitioners of the time. The image itself concentrates on Johnson's penetrating gaze and, as with so many of Glaister's portraits, conveys a sense of the sitter's real character.

From an art-historical view, assertions about Glaister's artistic achievements are of necessity speculative and prone to subjective interpretation. Still, one cannot deny that the power of many of his images lies in the strong characterization of his sitters, and individuality in his selection of poses. He seemed to pride himself on this stylistic ability, not only setting out instructions on proper dress to insure a good likeness,<sup>19</sup> but advertising his special skills in photographing children and 'new styles of portraits'.<sup>20</sup> The most frequently reproduced photograph by Glaister, the image that so exquisitely demonstrates both his technical skill and his aesthetic vision, appears quite appropriately on the cover of Alan Davies's groundbreaking book about early Australian photography, *The Mechanical Eye in Australia: Photography 1841-1900*. This portrait of Mrs Jane Day with her daughters Jane, Mary and Eliza, is a tinted ambrotype measuring 25 x 30 cm (framed 36 x 41 cm), now part of the collection of the Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney (figure 3). The image was obviously taken in Glaister's studio, for Mrs Day rests her arm on a table covered by the same drapery recognizable in many other identified images by Glaister. That the family has put on its most elegant clothing and is posed rather formally does not detract from the image's psychological intensity. The feeling of interaction between the figures, the individual gazes presented so directly to the viewer, the geometric compositions created by the placement of the bodies and arrangement of the hands produce the same kind of atmosphere to that depicted in the painting *The Bellelli Family* (1860), by Edgar Degas, now in the Louvre.<sup>21</sup> Consistently described as a 'psychological portrait', Degas's painting demonstrates a desire to create a seemingly intimate and spontaneous image conveying a sense of strained family relations. Not surprisingly, Degas was himself a keen photographer who sought in painting to express the fleeting psychological insights that photography could so often capture. Certainly, Glaister would not have been aware of Degas's painting or of any other paintings by the Frenchman, who was working at the same time, but his creation in this photograph of a mood of tension in the figures and of sadness in their faces seems to speak to a similar desire for emotional characterization and evoke something of the sitters' interior life.

In the course of his research into Glaister's portraiture, Alan Davies discovered a letter from this same Mrs Day to her son-in-law Charles Lines, dated 22 August 1861, which refers specifically to a sitting at Glaister's studio.<sup>22</sup> Lines had apparently married the eldest daughter Jane, which leads to the conclusion that the photograph under consideration here dates from about 1859, since the girl in this photograph was

not yet old enough to be married. That a reference to Glaister appears in this private letter is, however, not the only matter of interest here. The remaining contents reveal poignant sentiments that substantiate the psychological reading of Glaister's image. It is clear from Mrs Day's emotional words that she and her daughters were subject to severe trials at the hands of 'the head of our establishment', that is to say, her husband. The full extent of Mrs Day's letter reveals a tortured and violent man and a long-suffering woman:

... it is in vain to try to reason with him[,] convinced of this for years[,] it is best I think to bear it with patience ... when I can I pity the man whose own mind is his own tormentor[,] how happy he might be and all around him be the same if he would only engage his mind with something cheering in the thought that it will not last forever ... Once I could look for consolation to the hand that guided the chastisements but for the last three years trials come so heavily upon me those only of my own house knew them. Cast down I thought the hand that strikes these blows cannot mean them[,] in love I refused to look to him. He withdrew his spirit[,] and more have I wondered since[,] but could find no resting place ...<sup>23</sup>

Such unlooked-for revelations simply add to an appreciation of Glaister's talent as a photographic portraitist. Supreme technique, coupled with aesthetic sensitivity and an eye for psychological character, produces images that provide some of the most insightful records of Sydney society at mid-century. That the camera could provide such insights strengthens the claims for photography as an artistic medium.

#### Notes

1. Jack Cato, *The Story of the Camera in Australia*, Melbourne: Georgian House 1955, 11.
2. Glaister makes this claim in several advertisements once he moves to Sydney; see, for example, his statement in *Bell's Life in Sydney* (21 April 1855): 'Daguerreotype Portraits — The perfection to which this astounding discovery has attained in these latter days can only be rightly appreciated by inspection of the saloon of Mr T. S. Glaister (late of the distinguished firm of Meade, Brothers and Co., of New York)'. Quoted in Alan Davies and Peter Stanbury, *The Mechanical Eye in Australia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1985, 18.
3. I am indebted to several scholars and collectors for their part in uncovering this information: Gael Newton, Curator of Photography, National Gallery of Australia, Warwick Reeder, Director, Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne, and Alan Davies, Curator of Photographs, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.
4. Several weeks' research in New York City and upstate New York, in hopes of substantiating Glaister's early link with the Meade Brothers, led this author to dead ends, establishing only that the photographer's subsequent claim to learning 'the photographic art' as early as 1841 was certainly spurious. This research was undertaken in 1992 with the aid of a grant from the Australia Research Council. While yielding nothing at all about Glaister, archival digging did reveal much about early American photographic practice, and the aesthetic outlook of the Meade Brothers' pioneering work. See 'The Brothers Meade and the Daguerrean Art,' *Photographic Art Journal*, 3:5 (May 1852), 293-95; and Rita Ellen Bott, 'Charles R. Meade and his Daguerre Pictures', *History of Photography*, 8:1 (Winter 1984), 22-40.
5. *An Illustrated History of Sonoma County California*, Chicago: Lewis Publishing 1889, 509.
6. Originally, evidence of this photographic establishment was believed to be proof that Glaister senior was still in Australia in 1875; hence the confusion in the entry for Glaister in Sandy Barrie, *Queenslanders behind the Camera: Professional Photographers in Queensland, 1849-1920*, Brisbane: Macintosh Press 1987. Further research has uncovered a rather tragic tale about Glaister junior, as Warwick Reeder recounts in an unpublished note. Returning to Australia from America with his half-brother Daniel Metcalfe, Glaister set up as a photographer in 1875



- in Brisbane, where Menzies had already worked as a photographer since 1868. In 1877, the two established a branch in the country town of Toowoomba. In 1876, Glaister married Eliza Wilson and resided on Ann Street in Brisbane and had a son born that year, Daniel Skelton. On 6 May 1878, Glaister died of accidental poisoning when, in his darkroom, he mistook a glass of potassium cyanide for a glass of gin. His wife was at the time expecting their second son, Percy Middleton Onslow Glaister. At the time of death, Glaister was 26.
7. J. M. Gunn, *History of the State of California and Biographical Record of Coast Counties, California*, Chicago: Chapman Publishing 1904, 1055.
  8. *Ibid.*, 510.
  9. *Ibid.*
  10. *Ibid.*
  11. See Glaister's advertisement in *Sands and Kenny's Commercial and General Sydney Directory 1858*, as reproduced in Davies, *The Mechanical Eye in Australia*, 147, in which he states 'Mr. G. respectfully intimates that no CHEAP PICTURES are taken at his Rooms, as all work executed by him is warranted perfect'. See also the entry for Glaister in Joan Kerr, ed., *The Dictionary of Australian Artists*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1992, 299.
  12. Joan Kerr, ed., *Dictionary of Australian Artists*, Melbourne: OUP 1992, 300.
  13. *Sonoma Index-Tribune, California* (26 November 1904).
  14. Jack Cato, 17.
  15. Newton begins to formulate this idea in her book, *Shades of Light: Photography and Australia 1839-1988*, Canberra: Australian National Gallery 1988, 19-22. The basis for this assertion about American processes and an American 'look' in early Australian photography stems in great part from personal discussions with Gael Newton and Alan Davies.
  16. See *Bell's Life in Sydney*, (21 April 1855) as quoted in Davies, *Mechanical Eye in Australia*, 18.
  17. *Sydney Magazine of Science and Art* 1 (1858), 156. See Davies, *The Mechanical Eye in Australia*, 38.
  18. Personal correspondence with the author, 5 May 1991. Glaister frequently advertised his studio as a 'Portrait Gallery', and included the 'Opinions of the Press' about this Gallery in his 1856 advertising brochure, e.g. from *The People's Advocate* (5 January 1856): 'Likenesses on the largest scale, are taken stereoscopic, the most perfect ever given to the public. ... Hundreds of portraits of the most eminent men, and views of public places, adorn the walls'; and in *Bell's Life in Sydney* (26 January 1856): 'We have only to recommend him to special notice as an artist of considerable ability, and to invite a visit to his studio, where so many likenesses may be seen of intimate friends — perhaps relations, or parties who may be known to us by repute.'
  19. Glaister's advertising brochure, published in 1856, provides detailed instructions on the kinds of fabric and the colour of dress that should be worn for a sitting; see Davies, *Mechanical Eye in Australia*, 38.
  20. See his advertisement in *Sand's Sydney Directory 1866*, reproduced in Davies, *Mechanical Eye in Australia*, 175. Glaister also stated that 'Children of any age taken, on bright days, from 9 till 12, as the light is strongest during that time'.
  21. Of Degas's painting, Daniel Catton Rich has written: 'He is first and foremost a psychologist, trying to capture and fix the interior life of his sitters.' See Rich, *Edgar-Hilaire-Germain Degas*, New York: Abrams 1966, 10.
  22. 'Thought [sic] the dulling of the weather you would of course [sic] not expect to see any of us at Glaisters today[,] if nothing prevents me will be there tomorrow.' I am grateful to Alan Davies for a copy of this letter, which is in the collection of the Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney.
  23. Letter from Jane Day senior (née Fairweather) to C. H. Lines. Original in the Archives of the Society of Australian Genealogists, Sydney, no. 4/1738.3.