

# P09 The Green-backs of Civilization

## Photographs as Social Currency

WC3300

By the time the Civil War broke out in the USA, the daguerreotype and ambrotype were virtually extinct, displaced by the wet collodion negative and albumen paper print. Although the more recent tintype clung on in popular taste, two innovations became hugely popular, indeed fashionable. These were the *carte-de-visite* and the *stereograph*.



### Cartes-de-Visite

Cartes-de-visite, or CDVs as they are usually called for convenience in histories of photography, were photographs of one or more people, taken using the wet collodion negative process and printed on small cards the size of the "calling cards" deployed by fashionable ladies and gentlemen — hence the name, *carte de visite*. This meant they conformed to an international standard, measuring 6.4cm x 10.3cm (2 ½ " x 4"). They were printed, when first introduced, on fairly thin card stock (less than 0.5mm) but from 1870 on, thicker stock was used, so that by 1880, card up to 1mm thick was in popular use.

*Typical Carte-de-visite c1862<sup>1</sup>*  
*Note the square corners*

Although there had been earlier examples of calling cards bearing small photographic images — some of them were even salt prints — it was not until 1854 that the Parisian photographer, Andre Adolphe Disderi patented the 2 ½ " x 4" photographic calling card and even then, it was not until five years later — 1859 — that the CDV became a popular success. And successful it was: by 1863 CDVs had become so universally popular, at least in the middle and upper classes, that Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes was able to write

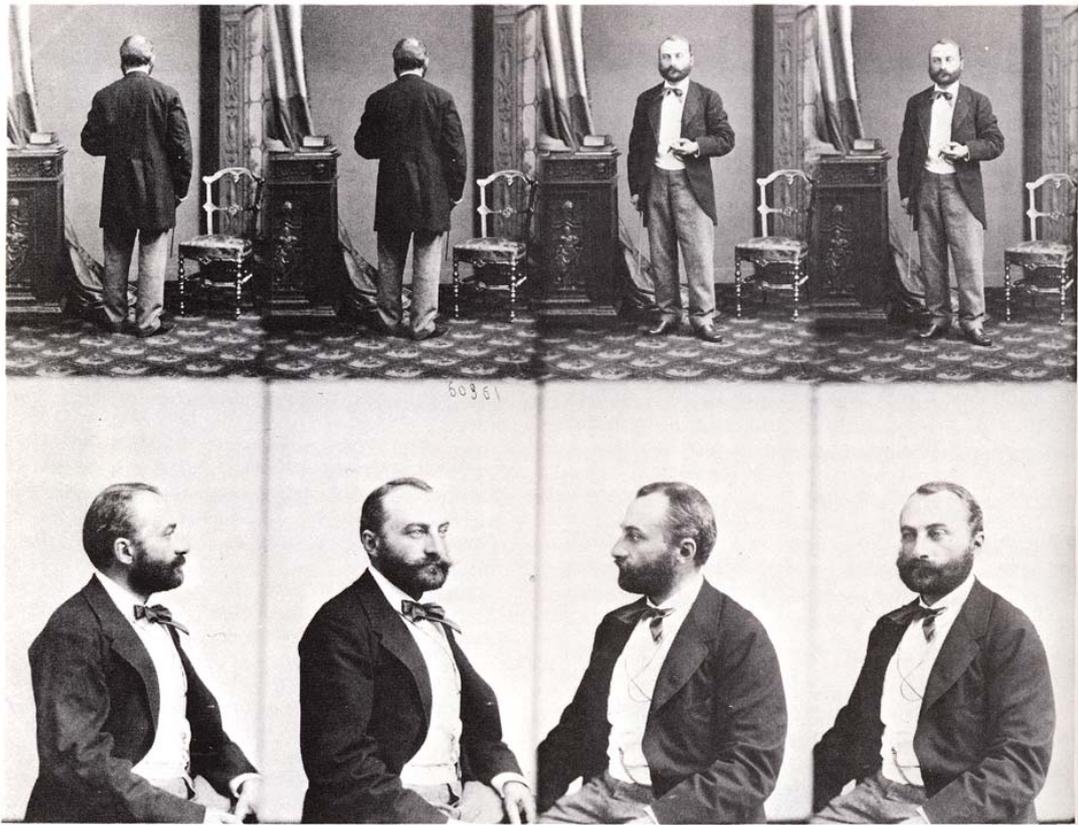
*Card portraits, as everybody knows, have become the social currency, the 'green-backs' of civilization<sup>2</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup> Photo and much of the above from <http://www.phototree.com/dating%5Fambro.htm>



*French CDV camera with four lenses, c1860.*

One of the main reasons the CDV became so popular was of course, they were relatively cheap and easy to produce so that the eventual cost of having one's own photograph reached the affordable range for most people. One of the reasons they were so cheap was that many photographers followed the practise used by Disderi himself, that of having a camera fitted with four lenses so that 8 negatives could be produced on a single 8x10" glass plate. These were printed in one go on a sheet of sensitised albumen coated card and later cut into their individual images which required no further mounting.



*An uncut print of an early (1850s) CDV by Disderi*

One of the advantages of using multiple lens cameras was that images taken simultaneously by lenses sufficiently far apart often made up a stereo pair, as in

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by American Museum of Photography, <http://www.photographymuseum.com/histsw.htm>

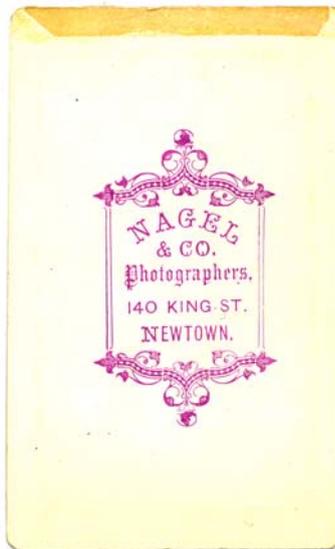
the uncut print by Disderi above. In this, the full-length photos of the slightly portly gentleman can be viewed in stereo.

Apart from moving to thicker card stock, CDVs showed several changes which — apart from the clothing worn by the sitters — allow most of them to be dated. For example, in the early to mid-'60s, the image was usually small, ranging from 3/4 " to 1", placed in the centre of the card.



From about 1865 — the year the American Civil War ended and Charles Dickens completed his last novel, *Our Mutual Friend* — images grew larger until by 1875, they covered the whole card. From 1865 also, borders began to appear, starting with a

fine line and ending with a thicker one around 1880 when they went out of fashion and stayed out. From about 1870 decorative backgrounds, including the use of props, came into use. In America, from 1864 to 1866, tax stamps were affixed, giving collectors a definitive guide to the date of the card.



*CDV of an unknown young man, Nagel & Co c1885-92 (Note the rounded corners)*

While these features can be used to help in dating, collectors also have to take into account location and the wealth or otherwise of the clients. By and large, photographers who had wealthier clients tended to be closer to the cutting edge of fashion. Similarly, those who practised in out-of-the way places, such as Australia or the American boondocks tended to lag behind the fashions. So, for example, while Edward Nagel and Co operated under that label at 140 King street, Newtown from 1885 to 1892, the CDV above has a bright red border which would have already gone out of fashion in Europe and most of America.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Note also that some kind of acidic adhesive — probably Sellotape — has been used at some stage to hold the CDV in place. This has badly damaged the card.



*Civil War Union officers in tent, 1862<sup>4</sup>*

Another feature of the CDV which is used in dating is whether or not the corners have been rounded. Prior to 1870, as a general rule, square corners were in vogue; after 1870, corners were rounded, not only for decorative purposes but also because the square corners tended to get worn and damaged more easily.



*Gen. George B. McClellan and his wife, Mary Ellen Marcy McClellan. Signed carte-de-visite photograph ca. 1864.<sup>5</sup>*

In their time, the sale of cartes de visite ran into the hundreds of millions every year. Queen Victoria is said to have filled a hundred albums of CDVs of visiting royalty, her relatives and other dignitaries. In America, the Civil War (1861-65) gave CDVs an immense boost as keepsakes and mementos of soldiers going away to the war and of the loved ones they left at home.



*An Aboriginal group, ca. 1868.<sup>6</sup>*

While the majority of CDVs were of one or two people, occasionally of a small family group, larger groups were sometimes recorded, particularly by photographers travelling in remote areas but unable to carry (or afford) the larger cameras and much bulkier equipment needed for

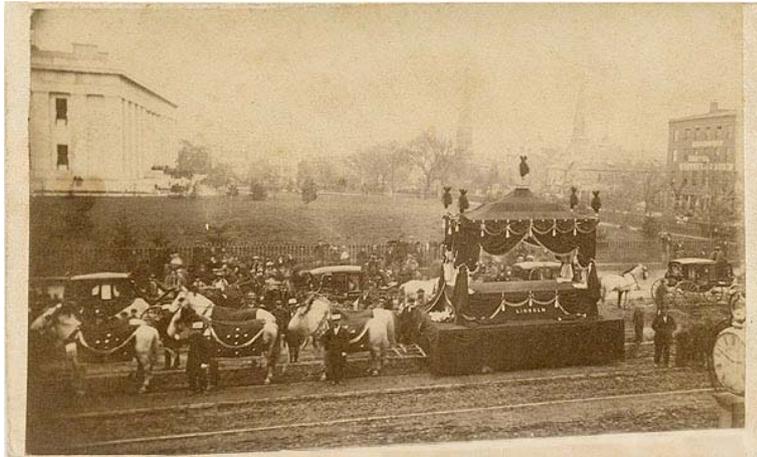
plate or larger studies. The photograph of the aboriginal group was made for

<sup>4</sup> Inscribed on verso: Major Myer, Chief Signal Officer; Lieutenant Stryker, Adjutant; Mr. Norton, Signal Officer, 1862. See <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/speccolls/FindingAids/Darrah/PSULD57001.htm> Darrah Collection, Image No. 57001, Special Collections Library, The Pennsylvania State University

<sup>5</sup> taken in Philadelphia by F. Gutekunst, (James Wadsworth Papers) <http://www.loc.gov/tr/mss/guide/military.html>

<sup>6</sup> National Library of Australia, nla.pic vn3510476-v <http://www.pictureaustralia.org/index.html>

Courret Brothers by photographers travelling in Australia and authorised to use the famous "Red N" of *Nadar de Paris*.



CDVs also came to function as news photographs, as in the case of this picture of the funeral of Abe Lincoln at the State House, Columbus, Ohio in 1865. Shown in the on-line exhibition *Small Worlds: the Art of the Carte de Visite* by the American Museum of Photograpy<sup>7</sup>, the annotation reads:

*This carte de visite is an important document demonstrating Columbus' participation in the national rites of mourning following the stunning assassination of the President. Although this photograph is unsigned, it was found with another view of the funeral, showing the hearses. The second view bears the imprint of "M. Witt, Photographer/81 South High Street/ Columbus." Presumably, both photographs were produced by Witt.*



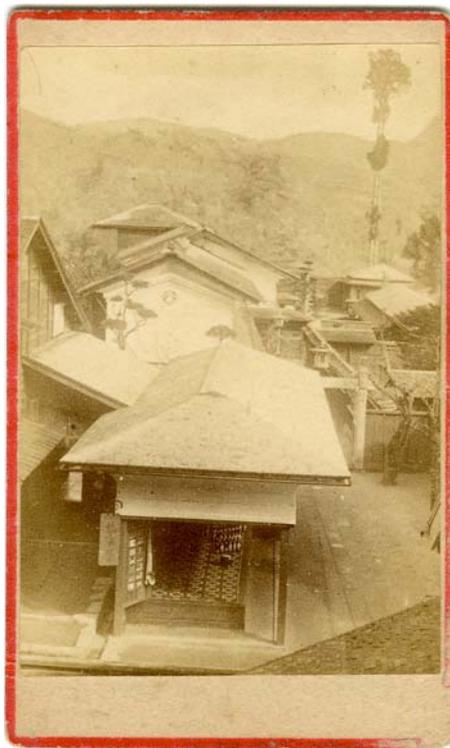
In a sense, pictorial CDVs also preceded the holiday and travel postcards which around the turn of the century supplanted them, and even the precursors of the "snaps" of later times... So, for example, on eBay there was advertised recently an albumen CDV labelled *Adersbacher Felsen – Der Zuckerhut* and dated 1874:

*Adersbacher Felsen  
Der Zuckerhut, 1874.*

Or, on the other side of the world, a CDV by William Penn Brooks who was travelling in Hokkaido and took this CDV which he noted:

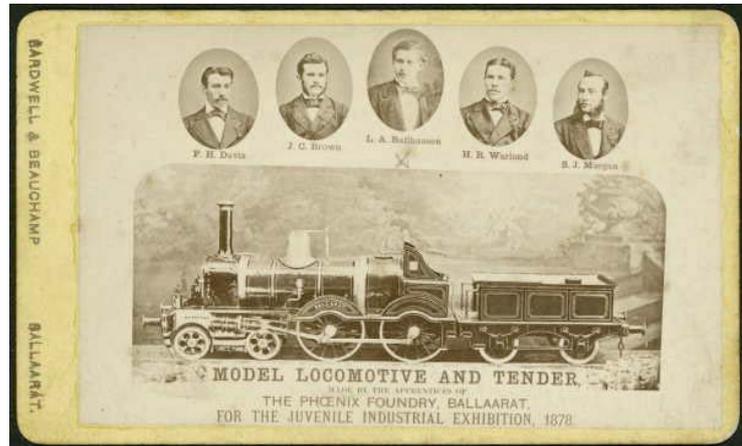
*"Suzuki Hotel, Nikko, Where I stopped in Summer of 81. [signed] W.P.B."*

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.photographymuseum.com/Linc1.html>



Of course, these small and convenient photographs also came in handy for advertising goods and services. An early example of an Australian advertising CDV is shown below:

*(left) The Suzuki Hotel, 1881<sup>8</sup>;*  
*(below) Advertising card for the Phoenix Foundry, Ballarat, for the juvenile industrial exhibition, 1878<sup>9</sup>*



## The Cabinet and the Postcard

In 1866, while CDVs were at the height of their popularity, a London photographer Frederick Richard Window began promoting a larger format for portraits. These he called *Cabinet* photos, presumably because the sturdier card on which they were mounted made them suitable for display on a cabinet. The new size was 4 x 5½ inches (10.2cm x 14cm), large enough — Mr Window seems to have reasoned — to allow photographers to display their professional skill better than they could on the much smaller CDVs. These albumen prints were then mounted on a slightly larger card, usually about 4 ¼ x 6 ½ inches (~10.8 x 16.5cm). The photographer's name and address was usually printed on the space between the print and the end of the card.



*Cabinet portrait of a man, taken by George F Jenkinson, travelling photographer, Argent Street, Broken Hill 1889-1900.*

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.library.umass.edu/spcoll/digital/brooks/brooksphotos.htm>

<sup>9</sup> State Library of Victoria, Accession Number: H85.55/8, Image Number: ho000011

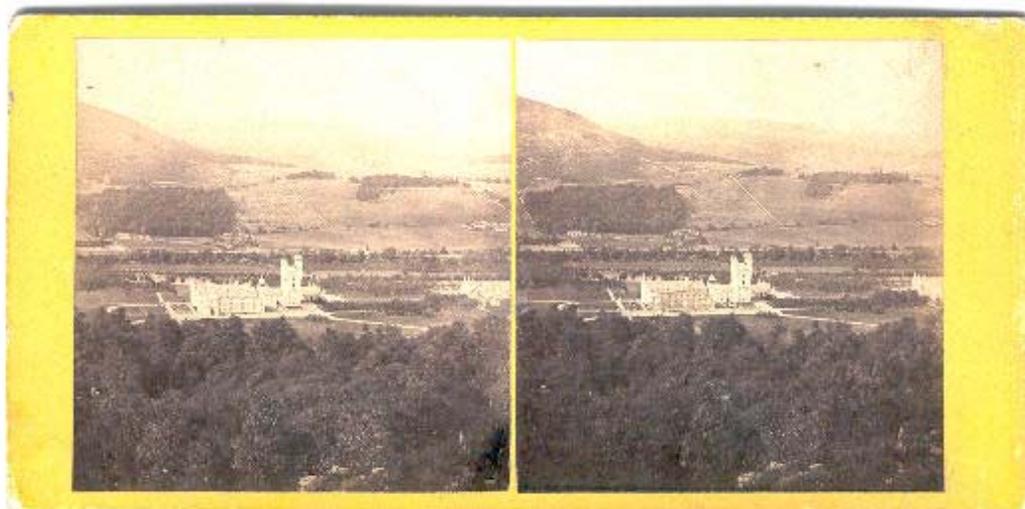
Because of their size, Cabinets were much better suited to group portraits and of course, showed off individual sitters better than the smaller CDV. A good example is a Cabinet in my own collection, inscribed on the reverse "Aunt Polly" and taken by *Knotts Yorkshire Studios* in Yorkshire Street, Oldham. Oldham is in Lancashire — actually now part of greater Manchester — and was, at the time this photo was taken, the largest spinning centre in the world. Mr. Knotts has gone down in



history for taking a huge panorama of Oldham, a panorama so large that it is only now with the help of digitising that the massive scene has been able to be viewed in one piece.

*Aunt Polly and family,  
Knotts Yorkshire Street,  
Oldham.*

Window was not the first to use this size: for example, a series of "Cabinet views" photographed by George Washington Wilson, was advertised by Marion and Co<sup>10</sup> in May 1862. This Scotsman, born in Banff in 1823 and originally trained in London in the calotype process was, in his time, not only the most famous photographer in the world but also established and ran the largest studio and photographic printing business in the world. The *Gazetter of Scotland* tells all:



*George  
Washington  
Wilson:  
Balmoral  
Castle from  
Craig-an-  
Gowan.<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> Robert Leggat, 1999. <http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/history/cart-de-.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> George Washington Wilson (1823 to 1893), appointed by Prince Albert to document the progress of the building of Balmoral. [www.worldofstereoviews.com/wilsonpage1.htm](http://www.worldofstereoviews.com/wilsonpage1.htm)

*Pioneering photographer, noted for his early studies of the Royal family. Wilson was born near Banff, the son of a crofter. He studied art in Edinburgh, London and then Paris, where he worked first as a portrait miniaturist. He also learned the calotype photographic process, returning to Aberdeen to set up a photographic studio in 1852. Wilson became a successful portrait photographer, including Queen Victoria amongst his subjects. Yet by constructing a portable darkroom in which he could prepare his plates, Wilson was able to travel around the country taking landscape photographs. With this he was able to accept a royal commission to record the construction of Balmoral on nearby Deeside (from 1853), and developed his long association with royalty, which resulted in the award a Royal Warrant (1873).*



*Wilson's photographs using the new "wet-collodian" process were both technically and artistically excellent and he became noted as the best photographer in Scotland at the time. As his fame developed, he was able to travel overseas, taking photographs as far afield as Gibraltar, Morocco, South Africa and Australia.*

*Wilson was also commercially successful, building larger premises in 1876. By the 1880s, his company had become the one of the largest and best known photographic publishers in the world, producing millions of cartes-de-visite, postcards and stereograms for tourists, as well as portraits for exhibition.*

*George Washington Wilson  
"Newhaven Fishwives", Postcard format.*

Wilson died in 1893 and his company was auctioned off in 1908, his vast collection of glass negatives and prints eventually finding their way into the collection of the Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums.

By the time Wilson died both the CDV and the Cabinet were in decline, being replaced shortly after the turn of the century by the Postcard. We are all probably old enough to remember the often garishly coloured and sometimes humorous postcards in our grandparents' and parents' collections of family ephemera. Although their origins go back a long way, postcards are a very modern phenomenon, giving way now in their turn to emails, video chats and even e-cards in this, the digital era.

A site dedicated to collecting postcards<sup>12</sup>, officially called *Deltiology*, gives the following potted history:

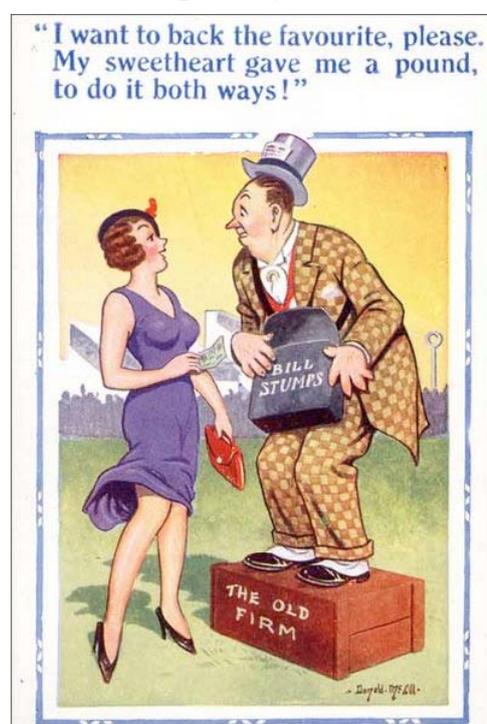
*The first postal card was suggested by Dr. Emanuel Herrmann, in 1869, and was accepted by the Hungarian government in the same year. The first regularly printed card appeared in 1870, a historical card, produced in connection with the Franco-German War. The first advertising card appeared in 1872 in Great Britain. The first German card appeared in 1874. Cards showing the Eiffel Tower in 1889 & 1890 gave impetus to the postcard heyday a decade later. A Heligoland card of 1889 is considered the first multi-colored card ever printed.*

Others disagree, some saying the postcard had been invented in Austria in 1861 or, more usually, noting that it was patented in 1861 in Philadelphia by John P. Charlton who sold the rights to HL Lipman who, in turn, marketed cards with a decorative border and marked "Lipman's postal card."

In 1894 British postal regulations were changed to permit "post cards" to be sent through the post. Similarly, in the US, the most significant change to postal regulations was one in 1898 which permitted the private mailing of postcards provided they carried the endorsement "*Private Mailing Card, Authorized by Act of Congress on May 19, 1898*".

Postcards have served many purposes, including as souvenirs, historical records, art cards, and of course, what people call *real photo art studies* including, of course, the erotic. Perhaps the most famous have been the so-called British seaside postcards, often humorous, frequently saucy, depending — as British comedy often does — on the art of *double-entendre*. These were frequently cartoons rather than photographs, but no matter their content, this form of cheap communication between friends and families reigned supreme for the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Although there were experiments with different sizes, the international standard has been 5 ½ x 3 ½ inches (~14x9 cm) which was pretty much the same size as the standard envelope used during the middle and later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Although this was also sufficient size on which to print the two images needed for



<sup>12</sup> <http://www.shilohpostcards.com/webdoc2.htm>

stereographs, most stereographs were extended to about 7 inches wide to accommodate the standard viewers.

## Dry Plates and Films

Although the wet collodion and albumen print form of photography worked well, it was not a convenient process, especially if photographers wanted to work outdoors and away from their darkrooms which required them to carry numerous liquid chemicals and other equipment, including a dark tent, as well as their cumbersome cameras.

In 1871, Dr. Richard Leach Maddox in an article in the *British Journal of Photography* that wet collodion could be replaced with gelatine<sup>13</sup>, a product made from animal hooves and hides. In this process, silver iodide was precipitated in as finely divided form as possible in purified gelatine which, while still a warm, viscous liquid, was poured over glass plates so that when they had cooled and the gelatine had "set", they became a dry, easily handled light-sensitive plate. From now on, these dry plates were loaded into dark slides back at the studio dark room or, alternatively, loaded into the dark slides inside a light-tight "changing" bag carried for the purpose. Once exposed, plates were taken back to the darkroom, wetted in warm water so the gelatine became soft once more, and then placed in the developer.

All of this was good in theory but there were some disadvantages to the new process which meant that, although in general use by 1881, dry plates did not immediately replace the wet collodion and in fact, wet collodion in some industrial photographic processes, continued to be used until the 1950s. The main disadvantage to the gelatine-based emulsion was that the silver halide which made it light-sensitive consisted in particles in suspension as distinct from the silver halides in solution in wet collodion. This meant what we called *grain* and which has a parallel in modern digital photography called *pixels*!

The finer the particles of silver halide suspended in the gelatine base the more detailed the image could be — or, in other words, the finer the resolution. However, there was a practical limit to particle size, not only in precipitating the silver halide at the time of manufacture, but also because the microscopic crystals tended to grow larger while awaiting exposure in the camera. However, there was something of a trade-off: the larger the grain size, the faster the exposure could be because the larger particles would be hit by more photons of light than were smaller crystals. So, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century we photographers — professionals and amateurs alike — accepted that fine-grain films gave greater detail and wider gradations of light and shade while faster films gave us more

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<sup>13</sup> Some say Joseph Wilson Swan actually invented this before Maddox went into print.

grain, higher contrast and lower resolution. Camera magazines, much as women's magazines are crammed with articles on diets and Princess Di, were filled with recipes for developers which gave greater speed and finer grain.

Another reason that dry plates were slower to take on than might have been expected, looking back as we are now, was that many photographers did not have mechanical shutters on their lenses so that the much faster emulsions would tend to be over-exposed; similarly, many cameras and darkrooms, although sufficiently light-tight for the slower wet collodion, were simply not dark enough for the faster dry plate emulsions.

Two other inventions accompanied the introduction of dry plate photography. One was the invention of *bromide printing paper*, the kind of paper which has remained in standard use for the past century and which was substantially faster than any of its predecessors in the darkroom. This was invented by the British chemist, Joseph Wilson Swan<sup>14</sup> who, among other things, is also credited with inventing the electric light bulb 20 years before Edison's patent, and of being the first to develop artificial fibres.

The second invention, in 1888, was that of photographic *film*. Credited to John Corbutt, an Englishman working in Philadelphia, this consisted in coating sheets of celluloid with the kind of light-sensitive gelatine emulsion used in the dry plate process. But it did not rest there for long: in 1889, George Eastman introduced *roll*



*The Kodak #1 and Eastman advertising*

*film* which he created for use in the camera he called *Kodak*<sup>15</sup> — an word, as he carefully explained, although a good marketing brand name, meant nothing and came from nowhere except his imagination. This film was already in the Kodak when you bought it. You took your pictures and, as Eastman promised, they did all the rest — you posted it back to Eastman where the film was developed and the photos printed and mailed back to you. In 1894, Eastman took this one step further with *day-light loading roll film* which, in one form or another, has been familiar to

<sup>14</sup> 1828 - 1914 (knighted in 1904). See [http://www.acmi.net.au/AIC/SWAN\\_BIO.html](http://www.acmi.net.au/AIC/SWAN_BIO.html)

<sup>15</sup> Images, see [http://www.ted.photographer.org.uk/camera\\_designs\\_1.htm#The%20Kodak%20in%201888](http://www.ted.photographer.org.uk/camera_designs_1.htm#The%20Kodak%20in%201888)

us all since childhood. Although the first cameras were loaded with paper-based "film" this was soon replaced with the more reliable cellulose even if, this type of film had one serious drawback: based on cellulose nitrate, it was highly inflammable! This was more of a problem for movies because of the arc lamps and heat of projectors, but it was still a worry all the same to still photographers. So, it was rather a relief when, in the 1930s, the older celluloid base was replaced with non-inflammable cellulose acetate.



*Brownie 620 Model C*  
1943

press-down lid which tended to spring open! So for a time the *Brownie* was discontinued, but re-released in 1901 and before it was replaced by more sophisticated models, sold almost a quarter of a million cameras. This first *Brownie*<sup>16</sup> had only a simple meniscus lens, its film carrier was made of wood and it had no viewfinder, only sights! However, it did take photos 2¼ inches (6x6cm) square, a novelty then, but later the most popular format used by photojournalists and serious amateurs for half a century.

Then, a few days after Queen Victoria was laid to rest and the Edwardian era began, Kodak introduced the *Box Brownie*. It got off to a bit of a bad start because the first batch, released in February 1900, proved not light-tight. Made of cardboard, these cameras had a



*Kodak - The Boy with a Brownie - Youth's Companion Magazine, 1903*<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See the excellent Brownie Camera Page at <http://www.brownie-camera.com/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/ea/kodak-search.html>

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