
Art & Photography



The Matterhorn from the Riffelberg. Drawn by Elijah Walton, lithography by J H Lowes. 1867. Chromolithograph. 35.5 x 25cm. From . Walton & T G Bonney. *Peaks and Valleys of the Alps.* Day & Son, 1867.

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Stereo Views

Victorian 3D Photography of The Alps



A rare portrait of William England taken in 1862.

Several years ago, browsing in a junk shop, I came across an intriguing double photograph of the Alps with the title 'Under the Special Patronage of the Alpine Club, Views of Switzerland, Photographed by W England'. As an associate member of the Club, its mention piqued my curiosity. What was this strange double view? Who was W England? What was his special relationship with the Alpine Club?

You may have seen the blockbuster *Avatar* and consider 3D to be a



'La Mer de Glace, Montanvert, Chamounix, Savoie' by William England (1863)

modern innovation, but it is much older; 150 years ago virtually every middle-class home had a stereoscope with which to view photographs in 3D. The double view above is a typical example of such an image, known as a 'stereoview'. In the 1860s, these 3D images were the best-selling format of photograph and were popular tourist souvenirs. The stereoscope was the television of its age and provided armchair travel, news and family entertainment – and even erotica.

The scientist and inventor Charles Wheatstone first described the concept of stereoscopic vision in 1832 and he patented a stereoscope based on mirrors in 1838. Initially only simple line drawings of shapes like pyramids or cubes could be reproduced with sufficient accuracy, but the arrival of photography in 1839 opened up huge new potential for the idea. David Brewster used lenses to simplify the design and exhibited his compact stereoscope along with 3D photographs at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Legend relates that Queen Victoria was most definitely amused by the device and a fashion trend was set in motion.

The concept is fairly straightforward. Our two eyes see a slightly different view of the world, which our brain combines into 3D reality. We can reproduce this effect from two-dimensional images by using a camera with two lenses set apart a similar distance to our eyes. The two pictures produced are then recombined using a stereoscope, so that only the left eye sees the left view and the right eye sees the right view. Modern 3D films use an essentially identical approach to obtain the images, but the left and right views are orthogonally polarised, superimposed and then viewed in 3D using suitably polarised glasses in the cinema.

By the 1860s, the London Stereoscopic Company (LSC), on the back of the popularity of 3D views, had become the world's largest photographic enterprise and its principal photographer was William England (1830–1896). England joined the LSC in 1854, the year of its foundation, and became pre-eminent among its in-house photographers.

He visited North America in 1859 and 1860, bringing back a stunning series of views of the east of the United States and Canada. It is claimed that his view of the French acrobat Charles Blondin crossing Niagara Falls on a tightrope sold over 100,000 copies, making it probably the best-selling stereoview of all time. He also made a series of views of Ireland in 1858, Paris in 1860 and was the official photographer for the International Exhibition of 1862 in London.

The LSC did not acknowledge the photographer of its published views. Perhaps William England did not feel he was getting the recognition, or indeed recompense, he deserved for his leading role at the company. In 1862 he invented the focal plane shutter, which allowed greatly increased control over exposure times and consequently an improvement in image quality. Perhaps he felt he could capitalise on his invention because in 1863 he left LSC to form his own photographic enterprise.

His first independent commission was to photograph the Alps on behalf of the Alpine Club. In the summer of 1863 his travels took him to some of the most famous tourist spots: Geneva, Lausanne, Chillon Castle, Sallanches, Chamonix, Gorges du Trient, Martigny, Sion, Zermatt, Interlaken, Grindewald, Lauterbrunnen, Reichenbach, Rosenlauri, Thun, Berne and Fribourg. The fruits of his labours were published as a series of 130 stereoviews entitled *Views of Switzerland – Under the Special Patronage of the Alpine Club*. Subsequent trips expanded the number of views of the Alps to over one thousand.

Long before the impact of global warming was felt, his stereoviews provide a remarkable photographic record of the Alps at the end of the Little Ice Age with dramatic glaciers reaching valley floors. His images demonstrate a genius for composition and an eye for the picturesque, with people placed in the foreground, usually including his French wife Rosalie, to provide interest and a sense of depth and scale.

In 1863, such a tour of over 500 miles, carrying many kilos of cumbersome and fragile photographic equipment and dangerous chemicals, was a major logistical challenge. Although a new railway had been inaugurated in 1861 linking Geneva, Lausanne and the Rhône valley, the rest of the journey would have been by stagecoach, charabanc, mule or on foot. Roads were poor; for example the coach road to Chamounix wasn't constructed until 1866 and the journey from Geneva still took ten hours. The chemistry of photography remained highly complex; England used the wet collodion process. Each fragile glass negative had to be prepared, coated and sensitised *in situ*. The photograph had to be taken when the plate was still wet and then immediately transferred to a portable darkroom and developed, fixed and washed.

The Alpine Club possesses a small album of photographs by William England from his first tour of Switzerland in 1863. It measures about six inches by eight inches and is bound in red leather. On the front it states: 'By permission, dedicated to the President and members of the Alpine Club. Views of Switzerland and Savoy, photographed by W England.' It contains



A stereoscopic view of the Matterhorn by William England.

24 larger format views (about five inches by four inches) mainly in landscape format, and 126 smaller format (three inches square) photographs, which are singleton images from a stereoview.

Was this album the commission that allowed him to claim on his stereoviews that they were ‘under the special patronage of the Alpine Club’? The minutes of the Alpine Club’s committee meeting for 1 March 1864 suggest otherwise:

It was brought to the notice of the Committee that Mr England, a Photographer who had received from the Committee, at the suggestion of Mr Longman, permission to dedicate to the Alpine Club a Volume of Photographs, was now superscribing and advertising his Photographs with the notice ‘under the special patronage of the Alpine Club’. Mr Longman undertook to make inquiries on the subject before the next meeting.

Little more than a month later, at the committee meeting of 5 April 1864, Longman had an answer for them:

The secretary read some explanations from Mr England the photographer, which had been obtained through Mr Longman. The committee directed the secretary to write to Mr England requesting an undertaking from him not to use the name of the Club in the manner lately complained of.

Naughty Mr England. The 1850s and 1860s were the golden age of alpinism and the British were at the forefront of the assault on the yet-unconquered peaks. The Alpine Club had an exclusive and exciting profile and England’s implied association with them was a canny marketing ploy. He was forced to change the title of his Swiss views to read: ‘By permission, dedicated to the Alpine Club.’ He later dropped all mention of the Club in his titles. It seems therefore that England’s association with the Club was

in reality a personal arrangement with William Longman, the publisher.

Only three years previously it was Longman who had engaged a young engraver to make his first trip to the Alps. His name was Edward Whympers. His new association with England tells us much about the coming of age of photography. I believe that Longman had the foresight to realise, decades before the printing technology was perfected, that in future it would be the photograph that would enliven the printed page, rather than the sketches and engravings of previous generations.

A contemporary review of England’s photographs, contrasting them with the work of prolific Alsace-based stereophotographer, Adolph Braun, appeared in the *Alpine Journal* of 1865-66: ‘...indeed, Mr. England’s work might fairly be judged the best of all; for his pictures excel Braun’s both in perfection of workmanship and in artistic grouping.’

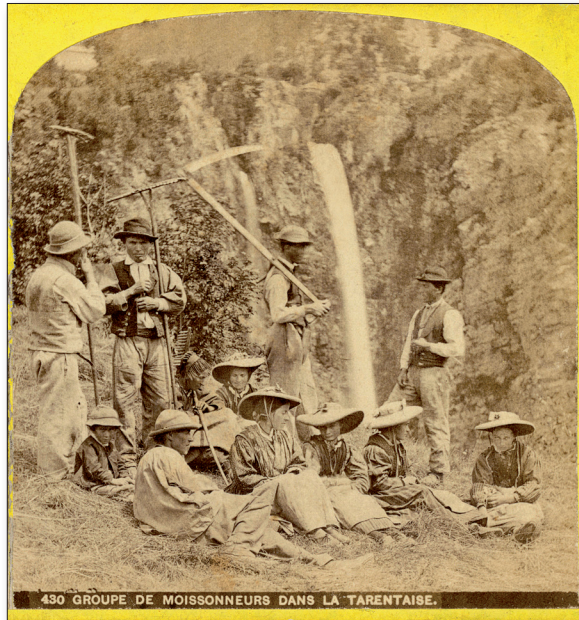
Praising the utility of the topographical information in Braun’s views taken at altitude, the *Journal* suggested how England’s photos could be of more use to the alpinist for route planning:

We can only express a hope that Mr England will include in his next tour visits to a few scenes which the hoof of the tourist’s mule cannot reach. He will find views equally picturesque with those he has already published, and the great mechanical skill displayed by him will be a guarantee for his reproducing accurately the forms and proportions of the mountain scenery.

William England paid no attention to the Alpine Club’s exhortations and never ventured far from the tourist’s mule track on his at least six tours of the Alps. He left that niche to others, like the Chamonix guide and photographer Joseph Tairraz and the renowned Auguste-Rosalie Bisson, who in 1861 climbed audaciously to the summit of Mont Blanc, with his cameras, glass plates, flasks of wet chemicals and portable darkroom. It is estimated that the 25 guides and porters carried 250kg of photographic materials. It was only the seventy-seventh expedition to reach the summit. On the ascent all the chemicals and solutions froze solid and as no prints from the summit have ever been identified it seems unfortunately that a satisfactory photograph was not obtained.

Bisson was a great photographer, but a lousy businessman and by 1863 he was bankrupt. William England, on the other hand, was a consummate businessman; not for him the costs of dozens of guides or the expense of a posh Paris salon like Bisson’s. He understood the market for his photographs. Mass tourism was on the increase, with the growth of the middle class and the advent of cheap and convenient rail travel. Thomas Cook led his first package tour of Switzerland in 1863, following a similar route to England – perhaps they even crossed paths.

Tourists wanted an affordable souvenir of their travels, a memento of where they had been and what they had seen, all in a realistic three-dimensional image. Armchair travellers wanted an attractive view that transported them into the heart of the sublime Alpine scenery. England built up



A group of farmworkers, by William England.

a wide network of outlets for his views, such as souvenir shops, stations and mountain huts. It was his business acumen, in addition to his photographic skill, which allowed *Photographic News* to report in 1880 that England was 'probably the largest continental publisher of European views'.

The commercial success of stereoscopy was a prime driver in the development of photography. The small format of stereoviews allowed the use of compact cameras and necessitated shorter exposure times. This led to developments in shutter technology allowing 'instantaneous' views and the first documentary photographs of everyday life. Even the most banal images provide a powerful insight into lost professions and contemporary fashion. Several of William England's most fascinating photographs from his Swiss tours are of this genre.

Although still hampered, until the 1880s, by the wet chemistry required, stereoscopy revolutionised Alpine photography and allowed realistic action shots to be taken at altitude. While Bisson, taking large format photographs, needed 25 porters for his gear, Joseph Tairraz, the Chamonix guide and photographer, could carry all his stereo-photography equipment by himself. Where Bisson seems to have failed to take a satisfactory view from the summit of Mont Blanc, Tairraz succeeded in taking several stereoviews that same summer of 1861.

I find it intriguing that despite being one of the most commercially successful photographers of the mid-nineteenth century, with a lionised artistic talent, William England should have been relegated to a footnote in the history of photography, being virtually unknown today. Even Edward

Whymper, himself a skilled photographer, chose to use at least two of England's views in his famous lantern-slide presentation.

Fashions change. In the 1880s, with the simplification of the photographic process and the rise of the amateur photographer, commercial stereoscopy fell out of favour. A new period of rising popularity around 1900 continued into the 1930s, by which time colour film and moving images had created alternative versions of reality.

Raised on the cheap and cheerful 3D images provided by Viewmaster discs, today's photographic historians have possibly viewed the stereoscope as a toy and a gimmick, downplaying its importance in the development of photography and ignoring its prominent photographers. That is sad and misguided. It is more complex to take an artistically satisfactory 3D image than a standard photograph; the skill of the pioneer stereo-photographers should be celebrated.

Early alpine photographs are prominent in the celebrations taking place in Chamonix in the summer of 2015, to commemorate the remarkable summer of 1865, 150 years on from the apogee of the golden age. The stereoviews of William England feature in a 3D exhibition reviewing alpine tourism 150 years ago in the Maison du Village, Argentière from mid May until mid October 2015. They also appear in my book *Chamonix Mont Blanc in 3D*, reviewed in this edition of the Alpine Journal. My website, www.wordpress.3dalps.com contains further examples and information on alpine stereoscopy – and on buying the book.

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