

## Smith, John Shaw

by Peadar Slattery

Smith, John Shaw (1811–73), pioneer photographer, was born 18 October 1811 in Co. Cork, fifth of eight sons of John Smith and Mary Richardson, who had an estate of several hundred acres at Clonmult, Co. Cork. In 1839 John Shaw Smith married his cousin, Mary Louisa Richardson. They had two children, John Augustus (b. 1840) and Florence (b. 1844). The Shaw Smiths did not inherit the family estate in Cork and lived in Dublin at Fairy Hill, Blackrock, and at 58 Fitzwilliam Square. Nothing is known of Shaw Smith's education or profession; it seems that he had investments which supported the lifestyle of a gentleman. He was a member of the RDS from 1856 to 1870, and of the Dublin Photographic Society/Photographic Society (DPS/PSI) of Ireland from 1854 to 1860.

He became interested in photography in the 1840s, the first decade of the new discovery, and took eighteen photographs in Paris in August 1849. The subjects of the photographs include Tour Saint-Jacques, a bridge over the Seine, the Arc du Carrousel, and Notre Dame. Shaw Smith's photographs from this period show good technique and it is likely that before he set out for the continent he learned the complicated process of sensitising paper from one of a number of retailers in Dublin – professional daguerreotypists, scientific instrument makers, and pharmacists – who offered photographic chemicals and materials for sale and instruction in photography.

From 1850 to 1852, he and his wife made a tour in Europe and the Middle East, during which Shaw Smith took over 300 photographs. They kept a diary throughout the tour, beginning at Rome (December 1850), until their return to Switzerland (July 1852). In Rome, Shaw Smith took twenty-six photographs, including, for example, St Peter's, the forum of Trajan, the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, the arch of Septimus Severus, and the Colosseum. Mary began to keep the diary when they arrived in Naples, and she made most of the 450 entries. The Shaw Smiths took their children with them to the Continent, but left them both at school for the duration of the tour – John Augustus in Lausanne, Switzerland, and their daughter Florence in Naples.

On 13 October 1851 they sailed for the east from Naples, having overcome their great unease about leaving their children behind. In the months ahead they would visit Sicily, Greece, Constantinople, Egypt, and the Holy Land. In Egypt, Shaw Smith photographed at Thebes, Philae, Abu Simbel, Luxor, and Karnak. He used a modification of the calotype or salted paper process discovered by William Henry Fox Talbot. In daytime temperatures of 70°–90° F (21°–32° C) in the shade, he worked by sensitising Whatman's paper in the morning – usually four sheets, 9 in. x 7 in. (23 cm x 18 cm) in size – and having taken photographs during the day, he

would develop them in the evening. Usually he would take two photographs a day, but took six on one occasion. The exposure time was normally five minutes. For higher daytime temperatures of 70°–85° F in the open he used Canson's paper with a modified sensitising solution. In temperatures above 85° F (29.4° C), Shaw Smith found that his photographic paper became spotted. He solved the problem by substituting four drops of bromure d'iode for one grain of solid iodine in the sensitising solution and used the new solution to sensitise eight sheets of paper. As a result, the sensitised Canson's paper kept well throughout a long hot day, but required a longer exposure time of seven minutes.

On his return to Dublin, Shaw Smith does not seem to have devoted much time to photography. A few undated photographs were taken by him at Rostrevor, Co. Down, at Fairy Hill, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, and at the waterfall at Powerscourt, Co. Wicklow. He joined the DPS in its early days, being proposed by James Robinson, 65 Grafton St., Dublin, a photographic retailer, from whom Shaw Smith may have received tuition in photography. Shaw Smith served on the council of the DPS/PSI from 1857 to 1860. On 1 April 1857, at a meeting of the DPS, he described how he sensitised paper on his Middle East tour and how he overcame the occurrence of spotted paper on very hot days. The only recorded public showing of his photographs is in the photographic section of the Dublin International Exhibition of 1865, in which he received an honourable mention from the adjudicators for good production from paper negatives.

In his latter days Shaw Smith worried about the state of his finances, even though his solicitor assured him that there was no need to be distressed about his means or affairs. On the morning of 28 January 1873, at 58 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin, while temporarily insane, he took his own life by a single pistol shot to the head.

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Dublin Photographic Society, register of members, 1854–9, NAI; Shaw Smith tour diary, 1850–52, Shaw Smith family papers; *Journal of the Photographic Society of London*, iii (1857); Henry Parkinson and Peter Lund Simmonds (ed.), *The illustrated record and descriptive catalogue of the Dublin International Exhibition of 1865* (1866); Peadar Slattery, 'The uses of photography in Ireland, 1839–1900' (Ph.D. thesis, TCD, 1992)