

Elizabeth Edwards, *Photographs and the Practice of History: A Short Primer*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, 166 pp., US\$? (paperback).

The current proliferation of scholarship analysing the relationship between the urban and visual material makes Edwards' primer on the role of photographs in practicing history particularly welcome. Rather than thinking in specifics or focusing on a particular case study, time period, or methodology (which has been done successfully by others) Edwards uses 'disturbances' to consider how photographs might instigate change in the practice of history, destabilizing traditional categories and assumptions. Most of us (scholars, students, or otherwise) are guilty of using a photograph without much thought, to merely illustrate a slide or give evidence that a building or urban plan existed, or a particular event occurred. Edwards states in the preface, 'I want to heighten sensibilities and provide food for thought' (viii) and this is certainly the feeling one is left with, that a space has opened into which criticality, complexity, and potentiality are entangled and celebrated.

Edwards asserts that the primer is 'for students, the discipline's new generation' (x), and this desire to alter the discipline from its base is apparent throughout. Whilst useful for students, it is the second audience mentioned, those many individuals who (often passively) work with photographs on a daily basis, whether in teaching, research, or as a means of documenting content, that would particularly benefit from the book as it forces a reconsideration of working methods and fundamental assumptions. Edwards' writing style adds to the accessible nature of the content; she suggests, interprets, offers possibilities, and embraces complexity in an inclusive and non-dogmatic manner. The ambiguity of photographs is not presented as a problem but an opportunity for 'the promise of alternatives' (55).

The **Bibliographic Afterword** demonstrates the ease with which Edwards has navigated a vast terrain of sources from a variety of disciplines and used them both implicitly and explicitly to develop a well-informed and yet accessible set of essays. Anyone who is familiar with Edwards' work will see that the book is the culmination of many years of research in the 'borderlands between anthropology and history' (x). The examples used throughout are indications of the source material from her more specific case study work such as *The Camera as Historian* (2012), an archival exploration of amateur photographers in England at the turn of the twentieth century, and also her edited works focusing on the physical role of the photograph such as *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (2010) and museums and collections as in *Uncertain Images: Museums and the Work of Photographs* (2014) edited with Sigrid Lien. The discussions are therefore inherently well-informed and borne from years of experience in working with photographs, with thoughts and ideas now 'pulled together' in an accessible essayist format to aid fellow researchers.

Edwards' book fits into a recent turn in urban history to reconsider the use of photographs. Former explorations of the concept in the 1980s such as Sam Warner's 'The Management of Multiple Urban Images' (1983) and David Mattison's 'In Visioning the City: Urban History Techniques Through Historical Photographs' (1984), both interrogated the role of photographs in the newly emerging discipline of 'new urban history'. This has been followed by a resurgence in the past few years in considering the methodology itself such as John Hinks and Catherine Armstrong's edited work *Text and Image in the City: Manuscript, Print and Visual Culture in Urban Space* (2017) and the recent special issue of *Candide* (2021) edited by Axel Sowa, Ela Kaçel in which contributors interrogate the use of photographs in a variety of sites from Berlin to Brasilia. And yet, despite the lack of direct focus on the urban, Edwards' contribution sets itself a part in that it avoids becoming an interrogation of methodology or a set of distinct case study analyses. From the outset, Edwards states that she wants to 'foster a set of fluid historiographical sensibilities' (12), to create a 'think-space' (1) and this sets the tone for the essays that follow. The eight chapter titles all address a concept

that has particular connotations in scholarly research, which are then ‘disturbed’ or ‘destabilized’ by photographs’ inherent ambiguities. Edwards takes these themes from concepts in intellectual history that ‘inform the commonplaces of historical practices’ (12) and uses them to explore what photography can do to disrupt these approaches.

The first chapter, **Inscription**, serves as a basis for the following essays as it covers many of the ideas that are subsequently discussed in addressing the ‘ways in which photographs inscribe the past’ (13). The term ‘inscription’ stems from the etymology of photography as ‘drawing with light’ and physically locates the photograph in space-time (18). This, Edwards asserts, offers a connection to the past as well as a ‘co-presence’ (20) that illuminates human experience. Edwards argues that unique to photographic sources, the camera inscribes far more than the photographer intended (18) and in doing so offers a complex site of analysis, whilst also challenging or ‘destabilizing’ the scholar’s role in working with traces.

The next four chapters, **Distance**, **Scale**, **Event** and **Presence** all address the ambiguities of the photograph; through the physical distance of time-space and the “objective” distance of the historian; that photographs offer access to microhistories in their ‘granular and plentiful forensic nature’ (45) contrasted with the abundance of photographs in contemporary society; how ‘photographs create the event and are part of that event as it is conceptualized,’ (59); and the role of photographs in recent trends towards embodiment, emotion, standpoint, and experience in that they provide a physical connection to the individual in the past. Through these discussions, the disruption caused by photographs is the connecting thread; the scholar is asked to consider their role in the continual reproduction of particular histories. Through addressing the uncertainties of the photograph, the scholar is encouraged to retain both a sense of the individual image but also how it fits into a wider context, between the ‘micro of the human scale’ and ‘larger-scale histories’ (49), and the significance given to ‘mundane occurrences’ (13). Edwards therefore asserts that photographs have the ‘potential to disturb established historical narratives’ in bringing together multiple layers of past experience (74), as each image has the potential to ‘disclose the world’ (Baer 2005, 5). In this way, photographs encompass the dualities of global and local, personal and collective. Similar, perhaps, to other methods used by the urban historian such as oral histories and formal analyses whereby an assemblage of sources is used to extrapolate a wider context or to make inferences at a broader level. Edwards however convincingly argues that the ‘dynamic, difficult, slippery, ambiguous, incongruous and contradictory’ (5) nature of photographs gives them a unique position in the practice of history.

The next three essays are more methodological in addressing **Context**, **Materiality** and the **Digital** and build on themes from Edwards’ work on archives, museums, the photograph as object. What Edwards convincingly argues for, is a means by which the fluidity of context is embraced, both understandings of the context in which a photograph was produced, but also the context in which an image is analysed. ‘Photographs as historical actors’, Edwards states, ‘are always on the move over space and time’ (90). On materiality, Edwards moves on to cover familiar ground in discussing the archive; how the availability and analysis of photographic material is manipulated and by extension interpretations and focus on particular aspects of the past. However, in highlighting the intentions behind various formats, Edwards indicates how closer engagement with the object itself can foster a better understanding of its agency and the times and spaces in which it has existed. The final essay on the digital, serves as a rallying call urging those engaged with photographs, to maintain criticality and ensure that the digital turn enables photographs to retain their inherent potentiality in moving

research thinking, categories, and methods forward (116), arguing that photographs ‘can be ‘used as a way of thinking’ (123).

Throughout the text, Edwards also notes changing attitudes towards photographs in relation to developments in fields of knowledge, for example, the impact of the ‘material turn’ in thinking through how photographs shape identities, or using the actor-network discourse to expand the contextualization of photographs. This demonstrates the intrinsic relationship between photographs and changes in society and underscores their centrality in scholarly activity. In many ways, Edwards tracks familiar ground in considering the survival of source material, the assigning of significance, the subjectivity of the scholar, the agency of the archive, the difficulties in contextualization, inference, and assumption, and yet in discussing the role of photographs in disrupting these norms, Edwards promotes welcoming disturbance as a driving force for challenging assumptions.

Whilst Edwards herself acknowledges the limitations of the book in that in some instances, especially if the text is to be used by students, it would be useful if the connections to other scholarship were more fully expanded. Equally useful would be to see how these abstract and complex issues can be worked through with concrete examples, which could be provided with a supplementary reading of Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies* (now in its 4th edition). However, addressing this would undoubtedly increase the size of Edwards’ book drastically and alter the aim of creating a ‘think-space’. The photographs included without comment at the beginning of chapters, which Edwards describes as ‘metaphors’, could hold this more concrete arena of discussion. The inclusion of these images does allow the reader to reflect on their own assumptions and yet it would be interesting, and perhaps more illuminating, to hear Edwards’ interpretation of those photographs owing to the vast knowledge she has of the subject. The translation of ‘think-space’ to a space of action is perhaps the next primer that we need.

In urban history scholarship, some of the ideas at play in Edwards’ book can already be seen, such as in Tom Allbeson’s *Photography, Reconstruction and the Cultural History of the Postwar European City* (2020) and its analysis of the material performances of photographs, or Catherine E. Clark’s *Paris and the Cliché of History: The City and Photographs, 1860-1970* (2018), which uses amateur photography to consider its role in memory and identity. However, Edwards’ contribution offers invaluable guidance on how to navigate the many ambiguities of photographs, to accept their ‘messiness’ and use it to better inform our analysis and use of photographs in the production of history, but also our inherent subjectivities as scholars. Edwards does not direct us to an answer, but she urges us to ask questions that challenge our passivity, assumptions and retain a sense of criticality towards our working methods. Rather than expecting (or sometimes forcing) photographs to play a particular role in our work, Edwards instils the complexity and ‘slippery’ nature of these sources and encourages us to embrace these intrinsic aspects and allow them to push the discourse forward, embracing the potentialities and opportunities a renewed engagement with photographs would create.

Laura Bowie

University of Greenwich

L.Bowie@Greenwich.ac.uk

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