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The Queen's Mark: Guns, Photography, and the Visual Abstraction of Precision

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and Heather Caverhill (one of the forum's contributors), *Photographies* brings together individual artifacts that each tell us something unique about the materiality of photographs and the history of photographic practices. The exhibition is organized around four themes, each posed as a question: What is photography? How do photographs shape memory and identity? How do photographs circulate knowledge? How do photographs become works of art? And each item in the exhibition—from a portrait reproduced on a “Wanted!” poster to a nineteenth-century bodybuilding training manual—offers different responses to these questions. The photographs gathered here by our forum's contributors follow a similar logic. Rather than providing coverage of Victorian photography, the selections reflect what scholars in the field are currently addressing in their research. Each image provides unique responses to questions of what constitutes photography, how photographs shape memory and identity, how photographs circulate knowledge, and how photographs become works of art.

This forum has gifted us an opportunity to collaborate not only with one another but also with the authors who share their research here. The strength of our contributors' work is especially valued by Vanessa Warne, who makes her final contribution to *Victorian Review* in the role of forum editor in this issue. Editing the forum has allowed Vanessa to work with and learn from many scholars in our field. They include her editorial teammates, three chief editors of the journal, ten guest forum editors, and sixty-six contributors. She has assembled fond memories of her time with the journal numerous enough to rival the abundance of *cartes-de-visite* produced by nineteenth-century photographers; she hopes you will enjoy this forum as much as she has enjoyed her work for *Victorian Review*.

To view the album of women performers and to explore the *Photographies* exhibition, please scan this QR Code:



The Queen's Mark: Guns, Photography, and the Visual Abstraction of Precision

JENNIFER TUCKER

WHEN WE think today about Victorian photography, certain categories spring to mind: portraits, mug shots, landscapes, metropolitan and colonial scenes—categories defined by similarities in form, style, or subject

matter. To approach photographs solely through a critical frame of genre is to miss, however, much that is important about the complex dynamics and historical meanings of photographs suggested by questions such as, who are the hidden actors and what are the historical processes behind individual photographs? What other conceptual and methodological threads—presence, scale, time, materiality, practices, and context—are important for going beyond photography as an isolated medium to engage larger questions and interlocking forms of expression and historical analysis? (See Elizabeth Edwards, Steve Edwards; Hayes and Minkley; Pasternak; Pollen; Tucker.)

I approach the photograph in figure 1 as an inciting object or, in the words of art historian Alexis Boylan, an “instigator object” that “do[es] not try to communicate static truths but, instead, seek[s] to inspire conversation about how we make and communicate knowledge.” The photograph—a flat square surface vertically divided into three rectangles—is striking for its geometric, abstract pattern and its modern aesthetic. In the centre is a black circle, bisected by two white lines. Grey markings across the surface appear like smears, the result of physical wear or industrial application. What we are seeing, while abstract, is layered by past use.

The Queen’s Target, Wimbledon, 2 July 1860 appears at first to be a rendition of precision, while its geometric abstraction is open, semantically, to multiple

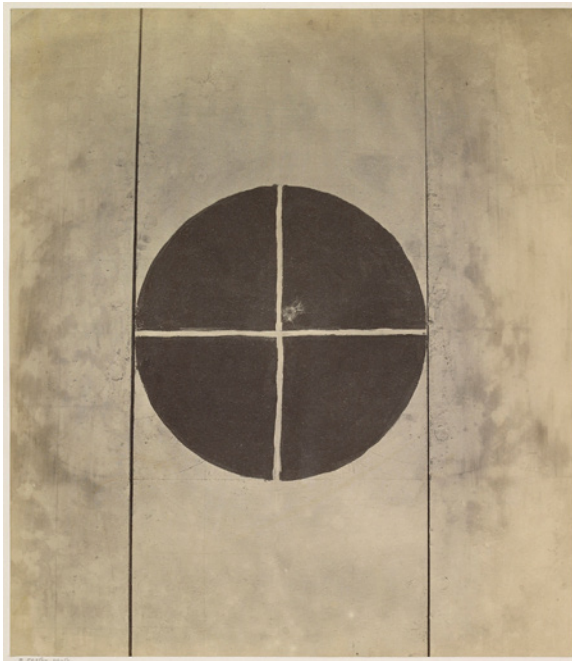


FIG. 1: Roger Fenton, *The Queen’s Target*. Albumen print, 28.2 × 24.5 cm (image), 2 July 1860. Reproduced by permission of the Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.

possible meanings. Its power—what one historian has called its “visual audacity”—is the “complete separation from any kind of context” (Pare 230). At the same time, the photograph is a record of a specific event that was widely covered in contemporary media: the precise location of the bullet’s impact when Queen Victoria fired the inaugural first shot of the National Rifle Association (NRA) of the United Kingdom at Wimbledon on 2 July 1860.

The British NRA was founded in 1859, twelve years before its US counterpart, and was granted a royal charter in 1890 (MacDonnell). It was created at the same time as the formation of the Volunteer Corp of 1859, a body of around 130,000 private citizens recruited to protect Britain against foreign invasion in response to fears of national unfitness for battle after the Crimean War (1854–56). Britain had a very small standing army and relied on a volunteer movement that had been disbanded after the Napoleonic Wars and revived in the 1850s, in the context of fears of a possible attack by Napoleon III, emperor of France from 1852 to 1870 (Rose 97–110). The statesman and Conservative politician Benjamin Disraeli warned in a widely referenced speech at Slough in May of 1858 that at the time of the United Kingdom’s 1857 general election, war with France had been “not a matter of weeks, or days, but of hours” (“Mr. Disraeli’s Speech”). The British NRA was also founded at a time of growing domestic acceptance of increasingly lethal firearm technologies as a key tool of state power in the wake of uprisings against British colonial rule, such as the 1857 Indian Rebellion (Wagner). Thousands of volunteer soldiers were recruited for weekly drills and shooting instruction. Over 120,000 men paraded past Queen Victoria in Hyde Park on 23 June 1860, the month before the NRA held its first annual rifle meeting on Wimbledon Common, an event that lasted for several weeks. Victoria herself had by this time been the intended victim of assassination by gun six times, including twice in Hyde Park, in 1840 and 1849 (Klein).

The Queen fired the first shot, kicking off the event. A rifle was bolted on a tripod and aimed at the centre of the target four hundred metres distant. The target was a heavy iron plate, six feet square. The Queen pulled a silk lanyard tied to the trigger that discharged the gun. After she had fired, an artist ran across to sketch the exact position of the bullet hole to show her the result. A photograph was also taken, showing what appears to be the mark made by the bullet on impact, slightly above the centre of the target.

Several newspapers covered the event, with some including pen-and-ink illustrations or graphic satires. One of the fullest treatments was “The National Rifle Association,” in the *Manchester Guardian* on 3 July 1860, which declared that “[n]othing could be more successful than the inauguration of the first meeting of the National Rifle Association:

When the royal party gained the rifle tent, Her Majesty, advancing to Mr. Whitworth, asked him to explain what she

had to do. Mr. Whitworth pointed out the butt and target, and then presenting Her Majesty with a piece of scarlet cord, attached to the trigger, invited Her Majesty to pull it and discharge the rifle. The Queen, amid the breathless silence of the Court and the assembled thousands, fired the rifle without the least discomposure or start at the report. Her Majesty directed her eye anxiously to the target to observe the result. The marker ran out, and immediately waved his flag. *The Queen had hit the bull's eye!* The royal bullet struck the bull's eye an inch above the exact centre. When the result was communicated to Her Majesty her face was suffused with a glow of unmistakable pleasure and delight, and she turned to receive the congratulations of the royal family.

The *Guardian* journalist continued:

A shot had been fired which would vibrate through the length and breadth of old England, and excite a thrill in the bosom of every volunteer. A hundred thousand cheers rose up in the air as Her Majesty's success ran along the line. Hats and handkerchiefs were waved, and the Queen's *debut* as a volunteer, was declared to be the most popular character in which our beloved Sovereign has appeared during her long and glorious reign.

The albumen photograph, taken a short time later by the photographer Roger Fenton, records the physical trace of the mark that the bullet made on the target when the Queen fired the first shot that inaugurated the NRA meetings on Wimbledon Common on 2 July 2 1860: a visual manifestation both of the nineteenth-century documentary impulse and the long entwined histories of cameras and guns, royalty and spectacle.

What may be learned about Victorian culture from looking at Fenton's photograph of the mark made by the bullet fired by the Queen? To begin to unravel its historical meanings, we must see not only aesthetics and visual conventions but also the historical and socio-political processes, thus appreciating photographs as social documents, inscribed with meaning, situated within a latticework of social and historical context (Samuel 337–49). In doing so, at least three “hidden actors,” as I will term them, reveal themselves.

The first is the Queen herself, not shown in the photograph, but revealed as the one who fired the shot by the photograph's title: *The Queen's Target*. As both an enthusiast of photography and a subject of photographic portraits, she influenced the success of the new medium and helped construct an image of an entire age. Here, she is shown as a different kind of actor: as a martial figure promoting military preparedness. Another “hidden actor” is

the person behind the camera, Roger Fenton (1819–69), one of the most acclaimed photographers of the nineteenth century, famous today for his images of the Crimean War. Fenton also produced landscape scenes, influenced by his training with neoclassical painters in Paris and London. Art historian Richard Pare sees him as striving to “capture what he saw as a vanishing and threatened world, a vision that embodied the bucolic idea of England as a ‘green and pleasant land’” (221). This photograph, however, shows a different side of Fenton’s work: a visual aesthetic embedded in the commercial world of work, machines, industry, experimentation, and utilitarian possibilities—and of commercial advertising, in this case, of the gun.

And this leads to a third “hidden actor”: the firearm. The point of the competition was for rival gunmakers to prove the accuracy of rifles at long distance (Enfield v. Whitworth rifles especially). The Queen fired a Whitworth rifle, named after its inventor, Joseph Whitworth, an important engineer and successful entrepreneur whose legacy is a large art gallery, now part of the University of Manchester. The Whitworth rifle was one of the first long-range sniper rifles in military history. Whitworth rifles were the first to use steel, as opposed to wrought iron and other materials, and had a unique hexagonal barrel, which was expensive to manufacture but dramatically increased the velocity of the bullet and hence its range and accuracy. They were highly accurate up to fifteen hundred yards, more than double the range of other rifles, such as the standard issue Enfield rifle. The Whitworth rifle began trials for the British government in 1858; just a few years after the Civil War began in America in April 1861, the Confederates began importing hundreds of Whitworth rifles (Häggman).

The NRA shooting competition of 1860 combined elements of industrial competitions, shooting sports, military drill, royal outing, and major public event, with spectators travelling to Wimbledon in special trains from Waterloo (“Wimbledon Rifle-Match”). Entrants competed for the “Queen’s prize” of £250. Gun manufacturers set up stalls to sell their weapons and accessories to competitors and spectators. As one historian points out, competitions like this one, with their “blend of patriotism, prizes, and purchasing power,” sustained the NRA “long after the French invasion faded” and “profoundly shaped how private gun ownership is viewed and experienced in Britain” (Masterson).

In addition to *The Queen’s Target*, Fenton made another photographic portrait that day: of the Whitworth rifle, mounted on a tripod. This was a portrait of precision engineering and design, made by means of a camera, itself a result of industrialization and mass production. Guns such as this were key to the creation and maintenance of an “empire on which the sun never set” (Satia).

Historical photographs present us with puzzles. To find answers, we need to consider photographic images in the contexts in which they are produced, displayed, and circulated. In “*The Queen’s Target*,” Fenton offered a visual representation of abstract ideals of precision, exactitude, engineering, and

modern design, but also a representation of a shot that was not quite good enough: that was just off the mark. The Queen's Target reminds us of the need to look beyond—to contemplate photographs as artifacts whose significance often stems from off-stage actors and machines.

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