'Sonsy Fishwives': Gender and Class in Early Scottish Photography
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[IMAGE 1] ELIZABETH (JOHNSTONE) HALL, THE BEAUTY OF NEWHAVEN, SALT PAPER PRINT FROM CALOTYPE NEGATIVE, DAVID OCTAVIUS HILL AND ROBERT ADAMSON, 1843-1847, MUSEUM NUMBER: 67390, © VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON.

In photography...one encounters a new and strange phenomenon: in that fishwife from Newhaven, who casts her eyes down with such casual, seductive shame, there remains something that does not merely testify to the art of Hill the photographer, but something that cannot be silenced, that impudently demands the name of the person who lived at the time and who, remaining real even now, will never yield herself up entirely into art.

These are the words of the critical theorist Walter Benjamin, writing in 1931 after his encounter with 'the fishwife from Newhaven'. <sup>1</sup> Taken by Robert Adamson and David Octavius Hill, this calotype portrait of Elizabeth (Johnstone) Hall is known not only as one of the foundational works of photography, but as one of the first to be self-consciously presented as *art.* <sup>2</sup>



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Benjamin's essay was originally published in German, over several issues of *Literarische Welt* in 1931 (18.9., 25.9. and 2.10). See Heinz W. Puppe, 'Walter Benjamin on Photography', *Colloquia Germanica*, 12.3 (1979), 273–91. The quotation used above is from the English translation of Benjamin's original, published in W. Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography', *Screen*, 13.1 (1972), 5–26. There are other, strikingly different translations in circulation. For example see Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Brigid Doherty and Thomas Levin Y. (Harvard University Press, 2008). Benjamin himself famously wrote on the topic of translation. See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Random House, 2015).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Sara Stevenson, *David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson: Catalogue of Their Calotypes Taken between 1843 and 1847 in the Collection of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery* (National Galleries of Scotland, 1981), p. 23. See also Juliet Hacking, *Photography and the Art Market*, Handbooks in International Art Business (London: Lund Humphries in association with Sotheby's Institute of Art, 2018).

[IMAGE 2] DAVID OCTAVIUS HILL AND ROBERT ADAMSON, GROUP OF FISHWIVES IN THE LANE, NEWHAVEN, ONE CARRYING WASHING [NEWHAVEN 50], 1843-47, SALTED PAPER PRINT, 20.80 x 15.70 cm, NATIONAL GALLERIES OF SCOTLAND.

Hill and Adamson's decision to photograph working people was not entirely unusual; nineteenth century portraiture was replete with the 'peasant genre', most famously, perhaps, in painted works by Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet. In the middle of the nineteenth century, working women, in particular, provided the foil for gendered representations of class, with the rural woman worker depicted as passive, content and natural; a positive embodiment of the working class in contrast to the moral uncertainties of the urban (often male) worker.<sup>3</sup> This concern with labour-in particular, women's labour-can be traced in early photography too, where we find servants and working people featuring as some of the earliest photographic subjects. Indeed Hill and Adamson were not the only photographers in Edinburgh in 1843 to render the fisherwomen and men of Newhaven into photographic subjects. 'The Edinburgh Calotype Club', perhaps the first photographic club in the world, was established that same year, and it too took interest in the people of Newhaven.<sup>5</sup> Depictions of fishwives were not confined to photography either: the fishwife featured prominently in popular culture in the nineteenth century; in poetry and in song. However, what makes Hill and Adamson's series 'The Fishermen and Women of the Firth of Forth' so unique, is that they present named, living and breathing subjects (women and men); captured in their flesh and blood before the lens. In a review of an 1846 exhibition in which Hill and Adamson's portraits featured, the Newhaven images are monumentalised in the very moment they are still in production:

What wonderful things they are!...these clean, sonsy, caller, comely, substantial fishwives, - what a refreshing sight! As easy, an unconfined, as deep-bosomed and ample, as any Grecian matron. Indeed, we have often been struck, when seeing them sitting together round their oyster creels, with their likeness to those awful and majestic women, the Fates of the Elgin Marbles.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Linda Nochlin, *Courbet* (New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2007), p. 97.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Anonymous, Mrs Lyon's Laundry Maid, Anonymous, Calotype Salt Print, Alexander Govan Calotype Album, 1845, St Andrews Early Photography Collection, ID: ALB-6-32-6; William Collie, William Collie Calotypes of Jersey Market Women, 1847, Scottish National Portrait Gallery <a href="https://www.nationalgalleries.org/search">https://www.nationalgalleries.org/search</a> [accessed 26 April 2019]; Hugh Lyon Tennent and Robert Tennent, Mrs. Fisher, 1848, National Library of Scotland

<sup>&</sup>lt;a href="https://digital.nls.uk/pencilsoflight/history.htm">https://digital.nls.uk/pencilsoflight/history.htm</a> [accessed 26 April 2019].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> 'Pencils of Light: The Albums of the Edinburgh Calotype Club', National Library of Scotland, 2002

<sup>&</sup>lt;https://digital.nls.uk/pencilsoflight/detail.cfm?id=00002940&volume=1> [accessed 7 February 2019]. See also Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography(2 Volume Set), ed. by John Hannavy, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 452.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> James Glass Bertram, *The Harvest of the Sea; a Contribution to the Natural and Economic History of the British Food Fishes, with Sketches of Fisheries & Fisher Folk* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1873); Charles Reade, *Christie Johnstone* (London: Richard Bentley, 1853).

John Brown, 'Exhibition of the Royal Scottish Academy, Fifth Notice, D.O. Hill, R.S.A.', *The Witness*, 22 April 1846. See also John Ward and Sara Stevenson, *Printed Light: The Scientific Art of William Henry Fox Talbot and David Octavius Hill with Robert Adamson* (Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 1986), p. 154.

The reviewer, Dr John Brown was not the only commentator to elevate Hill's artistry in such fantastical terms. That same year, another reviewer, Elizabeth Rigby, wrote "Let Mr. Hill apply the Calotype instrument to a simply manly head in a commanding position, it creates a Sir Joshua [Reynolds], - give it an old face wrinkled with age, it returns us a Rembrandt" But it was Benjamin who posed the question: who was the 'woman who was alive there'? Nine decades on from Benjamin, Newhaven's fishwife Johnstone Hall remains beyond our reach; her biography a near invisibility. Like Benjamin, I too share an urge to get closer to her. Who was she? Who was the woman who sat before Hill's 'Calotype instrument'?

For Elizabeth Edwards, nineteenth century photography's indexicality was used as *a form of 'virtual witness' - what I saw, you too will see' - attesting to the truth value of observation.*<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes refers to this as something that 'always carries the referent within itself'. Carol Mavor renders this moment even more human and *felt* when she reminds us that upon viewing photographs, the light that once touched our subjects now touches us: 'Photographs literally transport light from days gone by to the modern viewer...this time travel ensures a certain resonance between the sitter and the viewer'. Benjamin, of course, alluded to this in his essay on the fishwife, where he paused to reflect on the 'magical value' of the photograph, which resides not only in the thought and actions of the photographer, but in the subject herself. For Benjamin, she is 'still real', even if in only fragmentary and contingent forms. There is something about the sitter, and Johnstone Hall in particular, which means she will "never yield herself up entirely into art'." And yet, Johnstone Hall has been archived and catalogued variously as 'NEWHAVEN MADONNA' (University of Glasgow); 'Elizabeth (Johnstone) Hall, The Beauty of Newhaven' (V&A) and 'It's no fish ye're buying, it's men's lives' (Scottish National Portrait Gallery).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Ward and Stevenson, p. 39.

Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, p. 276. It should be noted that Benjamin was not the only commentator to reveal his interest in the living breathing subject. Rigby visited Newhaven and took an interest in the lives of the fisherwomen, even quoting her exchange with the fishwife Jinnie Wilson (and naming her too). See Sara Stevenson, *Hill and Adamson's Fishermen and Women of the Firth of Forth* (Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland, 1991), p. 19. Benjamin likely first encountered Johnstone Hall's portrait a 1931 German language volume on Hill and Adamson. The image was reproduced in that volume as a photogravure and printed on paper with a slight shine – factors which enhance its Rembrandtesque qualities. To Benjamin, Hall was known as number '26. *Fischweib aus Newhaven*'. See Heinrich Schwarz, *David Octavius Hill, Der Meister Der Photographie* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1931).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001), p. 30.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Carol Mavor, *Pleasures Taken: Performances of Sexuality and Loss in Victorian Photographs* (Duke University Press, 1996), p. 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Tim Dant and Graeme Gilloch, 'Pictures of the Past: Benjamin and Barthes on Photography and History', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5.1 (2002), 5–23 (p. 11).

<sup>14</sup> W. Benjamin.

Two summers ago, I went in search of Johnstone Hall and her biography at the National Records of Scotland with photography historian Roddy Simpson. Together we sieved through census returns and parish records, trying to piece together her life. 'Elizabeth Johnston' was born on 18 August 1822 in the village of Newhaven, and baptised a few weeks later, on 4 September. On 9 December 1842, aged twenty, she married local fisherman, Daniel Hall. In custom with Newhaven tradition, she kept her 'maiden' name and attached it to her new married name, becoming Elizabeth Johnston Hall (without an 'e'). They lived at 2 Wester Close in Newhaven, just yards from the port. She would have been between 21 and 26 years old when she was approached for her portrait. All men in her family – her husband, father, brother, brother-in-law, cousin, father-in-law and nephew – were fishermen in Newhaven; her sister is listed as a 'fish dealer'. This was a typical division of labour within the mid-nineteenth century Newhaven family.

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[IMAGE 3] CROWN COPYRIGHT. NATIONAL RECORDS OF SCOTLAND, OLD PARISH REGISTER BIRTHS, 692/1 80 145

See Roddy Simpson, 'Early Photography: Elizabeth Johnston Hall (1822-1901)', *University of Glasgow Library Blog*, 2019 <a href="https://universityofglasgowlibrary.wordpress.com/2019/02/01/early-photography-elizabeth-johnston-hall-1822-1901/">https://universityofglasgowlibrary.wordpress.com/2019/02/01/early-photography-elizabeth-johnston-hall-1822-1901/</a> [accessed 19 February 2019].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Old Parish Registers and National Records of Scotland, 'Johnston Elisabeth Baptisms in 1822 (Old Parish Registers Births 692/1 80 145 Leith North)', 1822.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Old Parish Registers and National Records of Scotland, 'Hall, Daniel Marriages in 1842 (Old Parish Registers Marriages 692/1 110 534 Leith North)', 1842.

The fishwife was a familiar figure in sixteenth and seventeenth century Scotland, as well-known as the many female taverners and brewers, and part of a wider-still network of women occupied with the purveying of food. Trades such as 'butter wives' and 'fruit wives' date back to the 1680s. A Fishwife named Bessie, who lived in Fisherrow at Newhaven, used to supply her upper-class clientele with 'delicacies such as oysters, lobsters, and flounders', apparently, she was capable not only of signing her own name but of writing out her own receipts.<sup>18</sup>

This is significant as these working women were thought to have the same agency as men in controlling their household income. This financial independence forged a distinct social position for the fisherwomen comparative to that of their counterparts in other parts of Scottish society. Accounts of the fishwives tend to refer to their hard work, labouring bodies, their community and song: women with creels (baskets) crying their wares of 'caller cod', 'caller herrin' 'new drawn frae the Forth.<sup>19</sup> A remarkable first-hand account from a fishwife in Fraserburgh offers a more brutal assessment of their working conditions. "As solitary women on the road...Fishwives were often attacked both for money and carnal knowledge. All carried sharp gutting knives. I would not have hesitated to plunge it into anybody who attempted to molest me."<sup>20</sup> In 1782, one woman from Fisherrow gave birth on a Wednesday and by the next Saturday morning was walking up to Edinburgh with her creel.<sup>21</sup> The fishing industry offered a precarious living and a violent death. Census returns between the years 1851 and 1891 show that Elizabeth Johnston Hall and her husband, Daniel Hall, avoided this particular fate. Yet her life was far from straightforward: some years later, widowed, and without children, she was forced to give up the house at 2 Wester Close and died in poverty. The disconnect between the representation of Johnston Hall and the material conditions of her life is stark. What might she have thought about the subsequent (even contemporaneous) commentaries on her portrait? Might she have read the 1846 'sonsy fishwives' review in The Witness?<sup>22</sup> How might she have responded to those ideological, often erotic interpretations of her as Madonna and nurturer?

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Rosalind K. Marshall, Virgins and Viragos: A History of Women in Scotland from 1080-1980 (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1983), p. 153.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Roy Strong and Colin Ford, *An Early Victorian Album: The Photographic Masterpieces (1843 – 1847) of David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson* (London: Cape, 1974), pp. 42–43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Christian Watt, *The Christian Watt Papers*, ed. by David Fraser (Birlinn, Limited, 2004).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Margaret H. King, 'A Partnership of Equals: Women in Scottish East Coast Fishing Communities', *Folk Life*, 31.1 (1992), 17–35 (p. 30).

Hill and Adamson's Newhaven series were exhibited several times prior to the Great Exhibition in 1851. For discussion see (Sara Stevenson, Hill and Adamson's *The Fishermen and Women of the Firth of Forth* (Edinburgh: Trustees of the National Galleries of Scotland, 1991), p. 45). In 1851, a group of fishwives travelled to London for the Great Exhibition in 1851. In her papers, Christian Watt writes: *As the Queen's Consort, Prince Albert had stepped down from his carriage to recognise a group of fishwives, which was a gentlemanly act on his part, he wanted them represented at the Crystal Palace, so the party went to spell each other for the duration of the exhibition.* Watt, p. 38.

In the National Records, historian Roddy Simpson finds an answer to my questions in a document written by a solicitor, dated 1899: "Mrs Elizabeth Johnston or Hall who declares that she cannot write on account of never having been taught". <sup>23</sup> In a single moment, the image of the literate fishwife – one that I too had desired and held on to – is shattered.

Her name was Elizabeth Johnston Hall, no e.

With these fragments in place, but still no closer to Johnston Hall's voice, I turn to my practice, to the making and restaging of calotypes. What could be learned from retracing the revolutionary processes of nineteenth century photography, from Lacock to Edinburgh, via St Andrews? Adopting the multiple role of the sitter, assistant and photographer, I worked with contemporary calotypist Rob Douglas to make images as historically close to Robert Adamson's methods as possible. It is a lengthy, physical and haptic process. One single photograph contains at least fourteen hours of labour and cannot be made easily without assistance. It is little wonder Jessie Mann was described as 'thrice worthy...the most skilful and zealous of assistants'. The washing alone takes hours of care and is central to the calotype's survival. 'The Newhaven Madonna', then, possibly entails the labour of not just one woman (Hall), but a second (Mann).



[IMAGE 4] CAROLINE DOUGLAS, UNTITLED, 2018, CALOTYPE 5x7".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> National Records of Scotland, '2 Wester Close Newhaven Valuation Rolls', 1889.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Roddy Simpson, "Exposing Miss Mann", ed. by Ray McKenzie and Monica Thorp, *Studies in Photography, The Scottish Society for the History of Photography*, 2010.

Through the process, hair colour, freckles, skin colour, head clamps and the folds of cloth, all reveal themselves in new immediate ways. In one case, the subject's tattooed arms did not show in the rendered calotype, yet her freckles were accentuated. My sitters did not even recognise their photographed self. As Macfarlane notes, "calotypes posit a truth, a glimpse of the world as if just disclosed, yet the moment of exposure of these individuals and the world they inhabit as 'true' or 'authentic' is at once undermined by the multiplicity of appearance of different selves".<sup>25</sup>

Through my practice, I was beginning to understand the nineteenth century calotype on new terms. It has long been assumed that the calotype exposure time was minutes in length. Having learned and faithfully followed Talbot and Adamson's recipe, I found that portraits could be captured in bright sunlight within tens of seconds or even seconds. This led me to return at Johnston Hall with fresh eyes: perhaps she was looking downwards not in shame or modesty, because simply because she had the bright sunlight in her eyes?

I returned to the archive armed with a new question: what outtakes and other 'selves' might exist? At The University of Glasgow Library Special Collections, I came across exactly what I was in search of - an 'outtake' entitled 'Mrs Elizabeth (Johnstone) Hall "Maggie Johnstone". <sup>26</sup> It depicts her just moments before (or after) the original, 'iconic' shot was taken. The negative has been retouched in ink and inscribed with the pencil markings "U.69" and "D+" and "Gum". These calotype markings fleetingly bring the production process to life (from my own practice, I now know how crucial they are to the maker). But most extraordinary of all, Johnson Hall *stares back*. This move, from absorption to theatricality <sup>27</sup>, initiates a form of communication, an exchange: Johnston Hall suddenly appears as a collaborator, as an active agent in the making of the image. In her slight smile, she disrupts a century of analysis of her seductive shame. Her presence is felt here in abundance.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Dana MacFarlane, "Very Unlike Themselves" Performance and Early Photography', *Studies in Photography, The Scottish Society for the History of Photography*, Spring 2018, 2018, p. 64.

GUL Number HA0763, The University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections (GUL). I am not the first to work with this image. I subsequently learned that David Weston and Larry J. Schaaf led the 2002 David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson Interactive Catalogue of the Collection at The University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections. https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/files/special/ha/index.html See also MacFarlane.

Michael Fried, Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).



[IMAGE 5] DAVID OCTAVIUS HILL AND ROBERT ADAMSON, MRS ELIZABETH (JOHNSTONE) HALL, MRS HALL "MAGGIE JOHNSTONE", NEWHAVEN, 1843-47, CALOTYPE (DIGITAL POSITIVE PRINTED WITH PERMISSION), 20.9 H x 14.8 W, ARCHIVES & SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW LIBRARY.

Both practice and archive, then, lead to a rethinking of the making of the calotype. And yet I never did find that trace of Johnston Hall in her own voice. She died in 1901, and was buried on the same day as Queen Victoria. Newhaven is no longer operational as a significant trading port. Its last working fishwife was Esther Liston, who retired in 1976, and was interviewed not long before she died. These are her words: *My mother said it was too hard a life and wouldn't let me learn it...at 36, I started with the creel. It seemed like the natural thing to do. At first I felt as if my neck was breaking. It's an art you know. I used to practise with a two stone box of kippers, then I got used to it.*<sup>28</sup> And so, another layer of understanding is added; an account of the fisherwoman of Newhaven; not Hall's, but an account no less, and perhaps the last.

But it is far from the final word in this project. Last year something happened that changed the terrain of my research. In trying to 'get close' to the fishwives, I learned they are my ancestors. For generations, my family has lived in the surrounding area of Leith. After some digging together with my mother in the National Records of Scotland, we traced the connections. Not only did

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Denise Brace, *Newhaven: Personal Recollections and Photographs* (Edinburgh: City of Edinburgh Council, Department of Recreation, Heritage & Arts, 1998), p. 37.

my family hail from Newhaven, but it comprised fishermen, fisherwomen, boatmen, ship carpenters, shipwrights and fishing net makers during the period of Hill and Adamson. In the archive, we encountered several wedding certificates bearing the signature of Rev Dr James Fairbairn, which show the following men to be members of my extended family. In my pursuit of scholarly and practice-based findings, I had overlooked a source closer to home.



[IMAGE 6] DAVID OCTAVIUS HILL AND ROBERT ADAMSON, GROUP OF NEWHAVEN FISHERMEN (MODERN CALOTYPE PRINT BY MICHAEL AND BARBARA GRAY), 1991, 21.30 x 15.70 cm, NATIONAL GALLERIES OF SCOTLAND

Laura Guy has recently drawn our attention to how the researcher can unexpectedly implicated in the archive.<sup>29</sup> Around the same time as this revelation in the archive with my mother, I became interested in the colonial dimensions of Hill and Adamson's work. In looking inwards (to the family archive), we have to face other, more uncomfortable truths. Recent scholarship has identified how Scottish fishing towns boomed from sale of salted herring to slave plantations. Indeed, according to David Alston, two thirds of herring exports in the late 18th Century were bound for the West Indies.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the Scottish fishing industry was made secure in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Laura Guy, 'History Work: The Photography of Jill Posener' (presented at the 'The Everyday Type of Thing': Symposium on The Work of Women Photographers, Goethe-Institute, 2019).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> See David Alston, 'The Fallen Meteor: Hugh Miller and Local Tradition', in *Hugh Miller and the Controversies of Victorian Science*, ed. by Michael Shortland (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 206–29.

direct relation to the oppression and domination of enslaved people on plantations in the West Indies. Silver darlings – caught by men, gutted by women, sold in blood for gold.



[IMAGE 7] CAROLINE DOUGLAS, RECLINING GODDESS, ELGIN MARBLES, 2018, SALT PRINT FROM CALOTYPE 5X7".

Perhaps the Johnstone Hall I have been in search of is non-existent, even fictional. And how different is my pursuit of Johnston Hall from those of her nineteenth century admirers? By looking again at Hill and Adamson's fishwives, through research and practice, there is still a great deal more to learn about how women shaped the making of photography. As the heritage, ownership or 'fate' of the so-called 'Elgin Marbles' are once again up for question – so too, perhaps, are the clean, sonsy, caller, comely, substantial fishwives.

This research was generously funded by the British Association for Victorian Studies. A special thanks to Sarah Hepworth at the University of Glasgow Special Collections for the very privileged access. Much of the archival work was undertaken with the University of Glasgow Honorary Research Fellow Roddy Simpson, without his knowledge and assistance, this biographical profile would certainly not have the same breadth nor depth.