Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5983

O’Shannessy, Emily Florence Kate

(1840 - 1921)

Born	18400101, Ballinsloe Ireland
Died	19210916, St Kilda Victoria Australia
Occupation	Photographer

Summary

Emily O’Shannessy was a professional portrait photographer during the mid to late nineteenth century in Melbourne. In 1864 she went into partnership with Henry Johnstone, regarded as Melbourne’s best photographer of the time. The Johnstone and O’Shannessy Studio emphasised realism rather than artistic manipulation. Their commissions ranged from inexpensive ‘cartes-de-visite’ portraits to large-scale photographs, including one of Australia’s first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton. The studio specialised in coloured, plain, and mezzotint portraits. O’Shannessey’s ‘Cartes-de-visite’ photographs took the form of albumen prints mounted on cards.

Details

Miss Emily O'Shannessy worked as a professional portrait photographer in the mid to late nineteenth century. She initially operated her own studio, but then went into partnership with the photographer Henry Johnstone and together they established the very successful Johnstone and O'Shannessy Studio, which photographed prominent figures of Melbourne. Little is known about O'Shannessey's life prior to her involvement in photography, other than the fact that she was born in Ballinasloe, Ireland in the late 1840s. In 1862 she opened a studio at 18-20 Madeleine Street Carlton, Melbourne, then in 1864 went into partnership with Johnstone, whom Jack Cato refers to as 'Melbourne's best photographer' (Cato 105). They took over the Duryea and Macdonald Studio, which was situated next to the post office. With Johnstone being an Anglican and O'Shannessy a Catholic, together they were able to attract clientele from both denominations.

The Johnstone and O'Shannessy Studio was known for its high standard of portraiture, with its emphasis on realism rather than artistic effects. Their commissions ranged from inexpensive 'cartes-de-visite' portraits, which were pasted onto small cards, to large-scale photographs – the photograph of Australia's first Prime Minister Edmund Barton being one such example. The studio specialised in coloured, plain and 'mezzotint' photographic portraits, some of which were displayed at the 1866 Melbourne Intercolonial Exhibition, their excellence winning the studio a medal. In 1869 they exhibited a large photograph of the Duke of Edinburgh, which was coloured with watercolours, at the 1869 Melbourne Public Library Exhibition. It was enlarged, printed and hand-coloured by O'Shannessy.

In the period 1870-1880 the Johnstone and O'Shannessy Studio was considered the best in Australia (Cato), as indicated by the fact that it was selected to participate in the *London International Exhibition 1872-73* at the Exhibition Building in Melbourne.

O'Shannessy and Johnstone established themselves as the prominent society photographers of their time, becoming the official photographers to H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh, K.C. and to His Excellency the Governor. Despite the firm's new name and O'Shannessy's equal partnership in the business, she was almost always listed as working for Johnstone. Moreover, her surname was consistently misspelt in exhibition catalogues, reviews and other contemporary records. Only in 1868-69 was the Johnstone-O'Shannessy partnership listed as 'Mrs E.F.K. O'Shannessy,' of Fitzroy. This downplaying of her role continued into the twentieth century; even the historians gave her little mention. Cato, for example, writes about the work of Henry Johnstone, but he makes little mention of Miss O'Shannessy in *The Story of the Camera in Australia.*

Emily O'Shannessy married the photographer George Henry Massey Hasler in 1871 and soon after left the studio. The couple had two daughters: Ethel Maud and Muriel. Her husband George took over the studio operations so Emily could look after the children. In 1885 the studio, which she had started moved to larger, architecturally designed studios in Collins Street, was considered the most luxuriously appointed studio in Melbourne (Lewis).

Technical

O'Shannessey's 'Cartes-de-visite' photographs took the form of albumen prints mounted on cards.

Collections

Johnstone, O'Shannessy and Co. – Carte de visite photographs. Royal Society of Tasmania, University of Tasmania Library Special and Rare Materials Collection

National Library of Australia

State Library of Victoria

University of Melbourne Archives

Events

1995 - 1995
Emily O'Shannessy's work featured in *Beyond the Picket Fence*

1872 - 1873
Emily O'Shannessy's work featured in *The London International Exhibition 1872-73*

Published resources

Resource
Beyond the Picket Fence: Australian Women's Art in the National Library's Collection, Carr, Sylvia and National Library of Australia, 1995,
http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/36337/20030703-0000/www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/fence/picket.html

Book
The Story of the Camera in Australia, Cato, Jack, 1979

The Mechanical Eye in Australia: Photography 1841-1900., Davies, Alan and Stanbury, Peter, 1986

Australian Women Photographers 1840 - 1960, Hall, Barbara and Mather, Jenni, 1986

Journal Article
'The Most Luxuriously Furnished Salon in Melbourne': Johnstone O'Shannessy's 1885 Studio, Lewis, Mary

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Created 25 October 2016
Last modified 2 October 2018