

“Captured on camera”: A historical and archival appreciation of the Arthur Elliott Collection

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Abstract

The Arthur Elliott Collection is generally accepted as one of the most pivotal photographic collections on Southern Africa. Housed and preserved at the Western Cape Archives and Records Service (WCARS), the incalculable value of the collection seemed evident from the daily requests from public to consult this extraordinary collection. After the governmental purchase of the collection in 1946 and its transferal into the archives service, the enormous collection of more than ten thousand photographs has undergone several indexing and classification attempts to enhance its management and to maximize accessibility.

Regarding himself as an amateur photographer, Arthur Elliot sought to capture the past by taking photographs on literally all aspects, including scenic landscapes, famous personalities and architecture of which he became especially renowned for his impressive imagery of Cape Dutch farmhouses. In many ways, Elliott’s picturesque photographs became priceless assets which depicts the cultural history of not merely Cape Town and vicinity, but also incorporated photographs on the interior during the early 20th century. Moreover, Elliott took photographs of wide ranging subjects such as heraldry, furniture, documents and paintings from artists like Bowler; thereby providing added value to the collection. In relation to the Bleek-Lloyd Collection, it is noteworthy that Elliott also derived various photographs on the Khoisan from the mentioned collection for his exhibitions. The article therefore seeks to address the evolvement, the types and subject-matters of photographs, as well as the archival management of the Elliott Collection and its importance as a visual representation of Cape and Southern African history.

Keywords: Elliott Collection, Arthur Elliott, photography, architecture, Cape history

Introduction

In 1859, the poet Oliver Wendell Holmes referred to photographs as “the mirror with a memory”.¹ The familiar adage holds that a picture is worth a thousand words. However, in the formative years of the archival profession, photographs were considered to be of secondary importance. Photographs were separated from manuscript and record collections, labelled as “memorabilia” or “miscellaneous ephemera”, and stored in specific archival strong rooms. An unintended consequence of the standard archival practice of treating photographic records as groups of items rather than individually was that many uniquely valuable photographs did not stand out.² They were effectively hidden within the group within which they had been classified.

The perception that photographs and other images were of less value than paper records started to fade as more and more academics and researchers started to request images during their visits to archives. Margery S Long, an audio-visual curator at the Archives of Labour and Urban Affairs in the United States, believes that, as a result of the widespread use of photography in our modern age, “there is a new, growing respect for the importance of photography as a link with and a record of the past”.³ Within the archival discipline, methods were designed to handle photographic records at the group level, sometimes to the detriment of more unique photographs, and to consider individual items in the context of the overall group. Prevalence was given to recordkeeping policies based on the group rather than the individual level, with the occasional disregard for unattached photographs.

It is now common cause that photographic records are equally valuable sources of information about the past than paper-based records, and that they convey information that words are not able to. This has led to a renewed appreciation of the importance of preserving and maintaining photographs in archival institutions as well as promoting their use. Photographs complement written records in unique ways, giving us a more complete understanding of a given period in time.

¹ Ritzenthaler, ML, Munoff, G and Long, MS. 1984. *Archives and Manuscripts: Admission of Photographic Collections*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists: pp. 7–8.

² *Op cit*, p. 7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

The Western Cape Archives and Record Service (WCARS) in Cape Town and its predecessors grouped and classified the Arthur Elliott Collection in line with what was considered archival best practice at the time. This article reviews the history of the collection, key features of this invaluable asset, and refers to the way the collection is currently being managed.

Arthur Elliott – the man behind the camera

In South Africa, photography has developed from its origins in the late 19th century to become a sort of popular cult. Although practising photographers in Cape Town such as John Paul, Mr York and George May were doing pioneering work at that time, none would stand in the limelight like Arthur Elliott, a photographer which would forever be associated with historical photography in Southern Africa. Particulars about his early childhood are scarce. He led an apparently purposeless life and had no opportunity for schooling. He travelled through North America, India and finally to the goldfields of the South African Republic (formerly Transvaal) where he presumably became introduced to cameras in the late 1880s.

With the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War (South African War) in 1899, there was a turning point in his career. He accepted a camera as a gift from Major Percy Clutterbuck, an event that would both give direction and purpose to Elliott's life.⁴ Elliott was suddenly propelled into an exciting career. The camera, which he described as "a square peg in a square hole" provided him with an instrument with which to capture images of the time in which he lived. Elliott became famous after visiting and photographing Boer prisoners-of-war and British soldiers posing at the Green Point Common in Cape Town with his quarter-plate camera.⁵ After the conclusion of the war in 1902 he became a commercial photographer. His main interest was photographing landscapes, buildings and documents. He was a reclusive personality and resided in a studio at 134 Long Street in Cape Town in which his personal possessions took second place to his photographic collection.

Although he received no formal education in photography, and even referred to himself as an amateur photographer, the technical quality of his photographs was good. Historian Hans Fransen said that Elliott "took great pains to achieve good lighting, composition and

⁴ Esterhuyse, JH. 1960. Die Elliott-versameling van historiese negatiewe. *South African Archives Journal*, No. 2, p. 37.

⁵ (WCARS Library) Jeffrey's Pamphlets JP269. *Arthur Elliott: A sentimental appreciation*. Limited Edition, privately printed for subscribers, with the assistance of the Historical Society of South Africa, Unie-V.P Bpk, p. 15.

definition”.⁶ His perfectionism undoubtedly contributed to the long-term value of his images. Elliott continuously tried to improve the quality of his prints by cleaning stereoscopic plates, and he was annoyed by shadowy figures in his photographs. Lighton’s memoir records that, “within a very few years Elliott had acquired a unique collection of pictorial Africana. In the process he had become intimately acquainted with the history of Cape Town and landmarks at first, and then with the history of South Africa”.⁷

By the time of the unification of South Africa in 1910, Elliott had accumulated a considerable number of historical photographs and was invited to mount exhibitions for Union celebrations. His first exhibition on 10 November 1910 had brought him into close contact with prominent politicians, such as John X Merriman and the historian George McCall Theal.⁸ His second exhibition in 1913 under the title “*The Story of South Africa Told in 800 Pictures*” included some of the best photographs Elliott ever produced.⁹ Theal wrote the historical notes in the catalogues for both exhibitions.

The third exhibition took place in the Cape Town City Hall in February 1923. A selection of 433 photographs was on display under the title “*Old Cape Colony*”.¹⁰ The historian Sir George Cory compiled the catalogue in which he said “the object of the present exhibition to recall some of the scenes of the past... arousing still further interest in South African history”.¹¹ The fourth and largest exhibition was to be the most outstanding. “*South Africa Through the Centuries. Told in 1,100 Photographs*” went on tour throughout the South Africa in 1930. The selection was masterly. The exhibition catalogue was thematically arranged by the antiquarian WR Morrison, who declared that it was Elliott’s aim to “let the

⁶ Fransen, H. 2000. *A Cape camera: The architectural beauty of the old Cape. Photographs of the Arthur Elliott Collection in the Cape Archives*. Johannesburg: Ad Donker Publisher and Jonathan Ball, p. 9.

⁷ Lighton, C. Undated. *Arthur Elliott: A memoir of the man and the story of his photographic collection*, p. 20.

⁸ (WCARS Library). Theal, GM. Undated. *The story of South Africa told in 600 pictures, being the catalogue of the Elliott exhibition held in Cape Town in 1910*.

⁹ (WCARS Library). Theal, GM. 1913. *The story of South Africa told in 800 pictures: The Elliott historical exhibition pf Photographs*. (Catalogue by Dr George McCall Theal, Pretoria, 1913).

¹⁰ *Old Cape Colony: Exhibition of pictures: Reception Hall, City Hall, Cape Town, February 1926*. Cape Town: Progress Printing Works.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

pictures tell a consecutive story of South Africa's past; and where a particular subject lends itself to grouping, everything of relative interest follows that particular subject".¹²

The fifth and final exhibition was held in 1938 under the title "*The Cape, Quant and Beautiful*" with a catalogue edited by the archivist Victor de Kock. Its main objective was to promote the architectural heritage of old Cape Dutch buildings, a feature for which the Elliott Collection would become renowned.

Reflecting on the types of photographs in the Arthur Elliot Collection

The success of the five exhibitions described above led to widespread recognition of Arthur Elliott and his work. Amongst historians, architects and artists there has been a growing demand for his photographs as a guide for restoring damaged buildings, for portrait prints, and for decoration.

A large portion of the collection comprises photographs of "pictorial Africana". These are scattered throughout the collection. The legacy of Elliott's interest in photographing the work of artists visiting Cape Town is a large collection of negatives of old engravings, paintings or lithographs of historical value, particularly watercolor sketches by Bowler, De Meillon, Baines and Poortemans.¹³ An original printing by the marine artist Higgins, for example, on an East Indiaman in a storming gale in Table Bay, was included in his collection after he was granted copyright permission. On the issue of copyright he was extremely cautious and even sought permission to include illustrations from rare books and magazines. In time, these photographs would prove to be of great value for academics and other interested parties to gain a more holistic understanding of the history of South Africa.

Photographs of landscapes, which also resort under Africana, could be utilised for future geographical or natural science studies.¹⁴ He once received an offer of £50 from an organisation in London for his photograph "Sunshine and Snow on the Simonsberg", but he declined to accept.¹⁵

¹² Elliott, Arthur, with descriptive notes by WR Morrison. 1930. *South Africa through the centuries: Told in a series of 1,100 photographs*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller.

¹³ Fransen, *op cit*, pp. 10–11.

¹⁴ The way he captured mountainous terrains such as Sir Lowry's Pass, Table Mountain and the Howick Waterfall in KwaZulu-Natal are some prime examples of his landscape photography.

¹⁵ Lighton *op cit*, p. 23

Elliot's persistence in photographing archival material is worth mentioning. His photographic reproductions of archival records such as treaties and other significant documents were included in his exhibitions and provided material for educational purposes.

Another type of photograph which is of great value in the Elliot collection is his inclusion of images of personalities and political figures of the time. These photographs were occasionally made by printing negative slides which he obtained as gifts or by buying them. It is clear that Elliott wanted to increase the scope of his collection by adding numerous photographs of personalities and other people. There is a multitude of historical photographs of groundbreaking events such as the anti-convict agitation. He took photographs or made photographic duplicates of images of folklore and ethnic groups such as the Cape Malay, Javanese and various indigenous people like the Khoisan, which he obtained from the Bleek and Lloyd Collection.¹⁶ Fransen has noted the large number of Malay wedding photographs, reflecting his lively interest in studying lifestyles and customs. As has already been mentioned, Elliott's photographs of prisoners of war, departing soldiers or life in encampment over time gained immeasurable significance with the passage of time.

He seemed obsessed with adding to his collection. A striking example was his meticulous restoration of a photograph portraying the signing of the armistice outside O'Neil's farmhouse after the Battle of Majuba in 1881 which led to the conclusion of the First Anglo-Boer War. Because the photograph was blurred and damaged, he sought and found individual photographic portraits of the leading figures at the armistice meeting. Elliott commissioned an artist to work from these portraits and 'touch up' the group photograph, after which he could make his own negative and produce a "first-class restoration of an important scene in South African history".¹⁷ This attests to the efforts Elliott made to produce quality photographs of "personality" which are a unique feature of the collection.

In addition to the pictorial Africana, the vast majority of photographs are of the material culture of Cape Town, especially its architecture. There are over 2 000 photographs of buildings in Elliott's collection, making this the biggest category.¹⁸ As urbanisation

¹⁶ Fransen *op cit*, p. 10. See, for example, the following photographs in the WCARS Elliott Collection: E169. Malay gentlemen, Jappie and Ismael; and E9144. Malay celebrations, Hout Bay.

¹⁷ (WCARS) Elliott Collection E3096. Armistice, group outside O'Neill's farm, Majuba. (President MW Pretorius, President JH Brand, Sir Evelyn Wood and General Piet Joubert were some of the leading political figures present at the meeting.)

¹⁸ (WCARS) Elliott Collection E7676. St. George's Street, Cape Town.

accelerated during the 19th and early 20th centuries, dilapidated housing structures, sometimes also historical buildings of importance, made way for modern buildings. After the Industrial Revolution and the rapid expansion of the Cape Colony, the preservation of historical buildings became cause for concern. This was not restricted to urban areas. This phenomenon was also taking place in the countryside with the deterioration or demolition of farmhouses whose owners could not afford to repair fire and weather damage.

The Cape Dutch style gradually declined after 1850 and there was a need to protect this shrinking heritage. Once Elliott became aware of the loss of the old Cape's architecture, he began photographing almost every area where there were buildings. He started systematically venturing into towns and to farmsteads to photograph their rustic charm of the farmhouses, with a specific emphasis on gabled architecture and building façades. In addition, he concentrated on photographic long shots of bell towers, getaways, doorways, pediments and thatching, leading to occasional criticism that he placed too much emphasis on the front elevations of homesteads. The front façade and scenery of farmhouses at Groot Constantia, Schoongezicht, Bergfliet or Leeuwenhof were majestically photographed by use of lighting and contrast.¹⁹ When viewed on the photographs, Saxonburg and the farmhouse rooftops of Jonkershoek almost fit in with the flow of the mountain peaks, illustrating Elliott's eye for achieving a logical pattern between building and nature.²⁰

Elliott's architectural photographs have enabled historians and architects wishing to restore buildings to refer to thoroughly detailed photographs of specific buildings, sometimes also including back views of houses, such as Parel Vallei and the Tulbagh Drostdy.²¹ Elliott's photographs of furniture recorded the contents of buildings and farmhouses. His attention to sophisticated furniture at places such as Libertas and Vergelegen indicated his desire to photograph the houses of collectors of armoires, porcelain, ornaments and tea pots. He apparently did not think it was important or interesting to photographing the furniture of the peasantry and the interiors of the houses of impoverished people living on farms.²²

¹⁹ Fransen *op cit*, p. 10

²⁰ (WCARS) Elliott Collection E1132. Jonkershoek, Stellenbosch.

²¹ (WCARS Library) Jeffrey's Pamphlets JP269. *Arthur Elliott. A sentimental Appreciation*, p. 19

²² Fransen, *op cit*, p. 10; (WCARS) Elliott Collection E768. Libertas, Stellenbosch.

The acquisition and archival management of the collection

Elliott died in 1938. It was his expressed desire that the state would acquire his collection of historical negatives for an amount of £5 000. He once declined an offer of £7 000 from an American company, suggesting he was keen to see the collection preserved on South African soil. After World War II, broke out, the state reallocated its financial resources to support the war effort. The state was reluctant to purchase the collection at the time. Complaints were heard that very large amounts of money were squandered on the war production and little interest was shown in the preservation of valuable cultural-historic assets.

The Historical Monuments Commission suggested acquiring the collection by raising money through a private fund. A private fund local committee was duly established with Dashwood Brown as chairperson, and in early 1939 negotiations with the executor of Elliott's estate resumed. As a member of a deputation to the Minister of the Interior on 6 March 1939, FK Kendall, chairperson of the Elliott Fund Committee complained to Senator FS Malan, chairman of the Historical Monuments Commission, about the committee's lack of success in raising the necessary funds and drawing his attention to a press advertisement placed by the executor of the state that Elliott's effects would be sold on public auction. Colin Graham Botha, a member of the Historical Monuments Commission who was present, suggested that the collection could serve as "a revenue producing proposition".²³ It seems that Botha was able to persuade the Commission to support the acquisition because, a month later, on 19 April 1939, he spoke about the steps that would be taken to acquire the collection. He drew attention to the promise of £1 000 made from the Union government and a like sum from the provincial authorities.²⁴ In May, Kendall said that the committee would provide a cash contribution of £100, while waiting on pro-rata contributions from other members.²⁵

The response from government was that it was not prepared to accept responsibility for the shortfall incurred by the committee. Nevertheless, some donations were made. The City Council allocated £500 and £25 was received from the University of South Africa.²⁶ In June

²³ WCARS. Cape Archives Depot (hereafter CAD); CAD 2/1/1/71. Historical Monuments Commission. The Elliott Collection. Draft notes of interview with Minister of Interior by deputation, 7 March 1937.

²⁴ CAD 2/1/1/71. Historical Monuments Commission. The Elliott Collection. Note on interview with general purposes committee. City Council, 19th April 1939, re Elliott Collection of negatives.

²⁵ CAD 2/1/1/71. Historical Monuments Commission. Kendall chairman of Elliott Fund Committee

²⁶ CAD 2/1/1/71. Historical Monuments Commission. Annual Reports. Fifth annual report of the commission of natural and Historical Monuments; Relics and Antiques as constituted under the Act No. 4 of 1934. For the year ended 31st March 1940. By the council towards the purchase of the Elliott Collection, 15 June 1939.

1939, A Jurgens, in his capacity as successor executor testamentary, said that the estate would be willing to accept an offer of £2 525 as a first instalment towards a total purchase price of £5 475, with the balance payable over a period of three years.

Finally, on 6 February 1940 a press statement was released to say that agreement had been reached during a meeting with the Historical Monuments Commission for a first instalment of £2 525.²⁷ In the minutes of the commission for the preservation of natural and historical monuments, relics and antiquities, FS Malan referred in a disparaging way to the failure of the Brown and Kendall Elliott Fund Committees to raise private funds, and the request for government to contribute to the commission's fund.²⁸ The Archives of the Union Government would be the guardian of the collection and have to adhere to the following conditions: (a) that the collection be housed in the Archives in Cape Town, (b) that the negatives be properly and safely stored, (c) that an adequately detailed catalogue be prepared, (d) that the public would be enabled to obtain prints at a reasonable price, and (e) that the collection would be available for inspection by the public under the same conditions as other valuable material in the Archives.²⁹

These conditions effectively placed the photographic collection material on an almost equal footing with the Archive's primary documents. From the time the Elliott collection was taken into the Archives, a high premium was placed on making the photographs accessible and making it possible to easily disseminate the pictorial information they contain by making it easy to obtain reprints from the collection. A key document specifies that that "representatives of schools shall have access to them... and if they so desire, to have reprints made of any of the pictures upon payment of the cash involved... subject to the regulations of the Chief Archivist".³⁰ These favourable conditions for the acquisition of the collection were the foundations for the collection to be well managed by archivists into the future. To prevent deterioration or breakage of glass negatives by public handling, a set of prints were made which were reprinted and distributed. Sets of prints were disseminated to the South African

²⁷ CAD 2/1/1/71, C.22/4/4. Historical Monuments Commission. *Cape Times*, 'Elliott group of negatives presented to Union Archives', 6 February 1940.

²⁸ CAD 2/1/1/71, C.22/4/6. Historical Monuments Commission. Minutes of Meetings and Agendas, p. 5

²⁹ CAD 2/1/1/71, C.22/4/6. Historical Monuments Commission. Elliott Collection of negatives, 21 February 1940.

³⁰ CAD 2/1/1/71, C.22/4/6. Historical Monuments Commission. Elliott Collection of negatives, 21 February 1940.

Library in Cape Town, Africana Museum in Johannesburg and the National Museum of Cultural History in Pretoria for safekeeping and usage.

A special strong room in the archives repository was allocated for the exclusive purpose of storing the negatives which were arranged in groups of 100 and packed in boxes. The collection, which comprised 10 504 glass negatives, were subdivided into the Elliott and WR Morrison collections (the latter comprising a selection of 1 100 from the greater Elliott collection), posed a tremendous challenge to the archivists.³¹ In addition to daily requests, orders and enquiries from South Africa and abroad, the archivists were required to arrange and describe the collection into a coherent entity. In 1956 it was apparent that the initial objective of identifying, classifying and generally cataloguing was overwhelming. Lighton says that Dr GH Breytenbach drew up an inventory with A Wolvaardt, an assistant archivist responsible for dispatching hundreds of prints in a room which is “literally surrounded by the Elliott Collection which fills a room and section of the reading hall”.³²

No master index had yet been compiled, so the exhibition guides served as the best sources of reference. Because no extensive inventory had been done, there were several shortcomings which hampered the initial arrangement of the collection. Firstly, the lack of descriptive captions was the primary hindrance, a result sluggish officials at the time and Elliott’s failure to devote the necessary time to compile an index of his own collection. Descriptions using concise keywords such as “shipwrecks” or “old Dutch house” were too vague for research purposes. Principal Archivist JF van der Merwe rightfully said in 1985: “it seems almost unbelievable that a man who went out of his way to attain perfection in his photography did not keep full record of his photographs”.³³ Scant attention was given to add captions on photographs on farmhouses or people scenes which ultimately problematize the work of the archivist to provide captions, and research and classification on the collection. In addition to this critique, Fransen made the critical evaluation that his photographs were all undated, negative numbers not in chronological order, and “equally tantalizing are the many photographs of rare Cape furniture, silver or porcelain without so much as an indication of their whereabouts or owners; and not even thematically arranged”.

³¹ Esterhuysen, JH. 1960. Die Elliott-versameling van historiese negatiewe. *South African Archives Journal*, No. 2, p. 36

³² Lighton *op cit*, p. 53

³³ Van der Merwe, JF. 1985. The Elliott Photograph Collection. *Archives News*, XXVII, January, pp. 28–29.

In the *Archives News* of September 1971, M. Potgieter, as archivist, expressed her opinion about the management of the collection and the need for an effective finding aid. Although there was a typed list of Elliott photographs, it was according to Potgieter, unsatisfactory, vague and inaccessible.³⁴ A proper system of indexing was eventually designed and alterations made to the existing system. The indexing, which was subject to ongoing checks, then had to be sorted and possible further entries were made before the index cards were typed. Indexing commenced by dividing the photographs into three main groups: persons' names, place names and subjects. A broad outline of the subdivisions of the indexing appeared as follows:

Persons' Names subdivided into:

1. Persons – in alphabetical order with surname (with cross-references to group photographs).
2. Group photographs (alphabetically listed).

Place Names and Subjects, divided into: Cape Town, other provinces, and foreign countries).

According to Potgieter, a list of 30 main subjects were drawn up and index cards drafted with suitable references to each photograph. The geographical subdivisions were done away with. Because the collection includes many reproductions of sketches by Bowler, Higgins and De Meillon, it was suggested that the collection be divided into two broad categories: (a) original photographs and (b) reproductions of pictorial material. Because of the large amount of information, efforts to provide cross-references were abandoned.³⁵ Potgieter said she was uncertain about how practicable this system would be until approval was granted, which was subject to change. In the later years, each item of the collection was reprocessed during data processing on the Advance Text Management System (ATMS), which was subsequently transferred to the Storage and Information Retrieval System (STAIRS) and National Automated Archival Information Retrieval System (NAAIRS).³⁶ This eventually enabled computerised source-reference retrieval and improved public access to the archival photograph collection.

³⁴ Potgieter, M. 1971. Die indeksering van die Elliott-versameling. *Archives News*, XIV(3), p. 11.

³⁵ Potgieter, *op cit*, pp. 12–13.

³⁶ Van der Merwe, *op cit*, p. 29.

Conclusion

The utilisation of photographic records for research, legal and educational purposes has become recognised as being of paramount importance as a unique adjunct to paper records in archives. Photographs serve as an invaluable link between the past and present by providing a visual, contemporaneous image of historical personalities, events and places.

The Arthur Elliott Collection is a striking example of the value of its irreplaceable photographs of the heritage of the Cape and of Southern Africa. While the collection at the WCARS is consulted almost daily for visual references to building architecture, including the Cape Dutch style and its artistic gables, there are many other photographs of great intrinsic value in the collection. The transfer of this wholly disorganised collection to the archives repository presented archivists with a significant challenge to organise it according to archival principles. It is almost ironic that Elliott, who was a perfectionist in the field of photographic technique, did not provide adequate descriptions himself. Ongoing development and enhancement of the indexing and cataloguing of photographs and migration of references to computerised formats such as NAAIRS has been in place since mid-1950.

As the custodian the Elliott Collection, WCARS appreciates the privilege of being responsible for preservation and management, and for making the contents as widely accessible as possible. In the words of Fransen, this “is one of the most remarkable collections in the world”.³⁷

³⁷ Fransen *op cit*, p. 13.