



**Study visit Barnstaple 26 July 214 -  
James Ravilious / The rural - the pastoral  
Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon 11am - 4pm**

In the morning Robin Ravilious, widow of photographer James Ravilious, tells the 11 OCA students about her late husband's work contributing to the Beaford photographic archive of life in the North Devon's rural areas.

Ravilious, originally an artist and art teacher like his father Eric Ravilious became a self-taught photographer after seeing images of Henri Cartier-Bresson.

For 17 years (1972 - 1989) he photographed the disappearing world of farmers and their North Devon landscape, compiling over 80'000 black and white photographs. By showing slides of the archive photographs Robin describes 5 "themes" Ravilious' photographs can be ascribed to:

1. Climate / Weather
2. Old skills
3. Old buildings
4. Portraits
5. Village Scenes and special occasions.



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The photographs that the Museum of Barnstaple and North Devon owns and laid out for us showed a wealth of "rural documentary" scenes that, apart from the careful composition and richness of photographic skill, have historical value, as Robin pointed out, since many of the depicted practises no longer exist in the form they were documented 40 years ago.

Quote from the James Ravilious website:

"I know of no other presentation of a particular place and people which is as broad and as captivating as James Ravilious's photographs of North Devon. They are the fruit of a quite exceptional acuity and patience of witness and of a quite unusual humility and warmth of spirit. This great body of work establishes its author as a master of the art of photography whilst at the same time it makes an unparalleled pictorial contribution to social history." (Olive Cook, Matrix)

Ravilious photographed with a sense of realism. The images are beautiful in composition, often photographed in early morning light - they hold the same kind of fascination for me as the photographs Andrea Garbald took in a completely different place (Val Bregaglia Switzerland) 50 - 70 years earlier.

Once again I am forced to reflect on my predilection for rural documentary photography. It is not a sentimental longing for a life of deprivation and simplicity I personally never experienced, I hope. Maybe more the fact that the visualisation of a lifestyle so utterly different to my own nevertheless allows an (anthropological or psychological) understanding of the "condition humaine" in the way no verbal description could possibly do.



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James Ravilioius did not idealise life in North Devon - he appears to have chronicled the hardship, the poverty and the landscapes the way they appeared to him - a constructed reality, as all photography is, but definitely not from a perspective to embellish what he wanted to show, to alter it or embellish/romanticise it. ( I am aware that words like "hardship" and "poverty" are connotations we make from a temporal and social distance of course, but do not know enough about Ravilioius himself to be able to state in how far he was aware of this and chose his frames to suggest these connotations...)

Actually living in the place and gaining the trust of the people there, he was able to portray many scenes (the country doctor examining his old or dying patients come to mind) that would never have been possible to an outsider:

Cartier-Bresso's influence in the way Ravilioius photographed is evident, even though the subject matter could hardly be more different...



After lunch there is time to look at some of the 40x60 original prints of the museum. Unfortunately they are in piles rather than laid out or hung, which does not really give the opportunity to appreciate or compare the images, let alone see them in relationship to each other

Tutor Jesse Alexander then talks about landscape photography today, exploring the terms "rural" as denoting the interaction of people and countryside, "pastoral" containing in its etymology fields (and cows) and originally associated with nomadic practises and "bucolic" ("the shepherd and the milkmaid") as as an idealised and often clichéd view of rural scenes.

"In visual culture, the term "pastoral" is used in relation to work that incorporate agricultural details as either ancillary details or entire subjects within a narrative or entire subjects within a narrative."(Alexander, 2015). This is helpful, as I am beginning to be able to differentiate between kinds of landscape photography and ways photographers have used and are using to depict rural scenes.... -

Although the trip to Barnstaple took me several hundred kilometers out of my way, I reflect on the way home, the journey was well worth it. For a start the theme of the archive is interesting with respect to my work on the Garbald archive . Big difference here: Ravilioius knew he was contributing to an archive (I am thinking rather like Roman Vishniac's documenting Eastern European Jewry before WWII,).

Andrea Garbald, who was documenting Val Bregaglia by doing "commercial" photography in his time, the collection, almost 100 years later, resulting in an archive that also seems to document his context, but far less deliberate (and complete) than James Ravilioius...

The afternoon session has brought another understanding for landscape photography, an understanding that there are temporal ways of depicting (and understanding) landscape that have more to do with the spirit of the time than any objective or superior categorisation. Not for the first time I wonder whether the difference in English and Swiss landscape does not also produce different ways of talking - and theorising - about landscape photography. By now I am (almost) convinced it does, but I'd have to do more research on this before reaching an informed rather than intuitive conclusion.....