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Revealing the Holy Land: The Photographic Exploration of Palestine

Kathleen Stewart Howe

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This is the catalog for an exhibition of ninety nineteenth-century photographs drawn primarily from the world-class collection of Michael G. Wilson. Included are the starkly beautiful photographs of Sergeant James McDonald's surveys of Palestine and Jerusalem; recently discovered photographs by Ernest Benecke; and the rare photographs by Maxime Du Camp taken in 1850 as he traveled with Flaubert.

With the invention of photography and the increasing popularity of travel in the mid-nineteenth century, the Holy Land became one of the most photographed places on earth. Interest in Jerusalem and Palestine was particularly pronounced in England, partly because of England's need to control its routes to the riches of India, but also because of Britain's cultural identification with the people and lands of the Bible. Imperial ambition and deeply ingrained cultural associations resulted in a surge of photographic activity in Palestine. McDonald's photographs from surveys of Jerusalem and the Sinai epitomize the dual imperatives of Bible and Empire.

Photography provided a new standard for authenticity in pictorial representations. Early photographs were considered the ultimate bearers of "reality" at a time when viewers had not yet lost their naïve faith in the objective accuracy of photography. Throughout the last half of the nineteenth century, the Holy Land drew legions of photographers: amateurs recording a stop on the Grand Tour, academics pursuing archaeological theories, military surveyors—all trying to capture the truthfulness of a land that had enormous spiritual, emotional, and political connotations for most of the Western world. What they saw, and how they saw it, are the themes of this beautifully recorded collection.

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