Introduction

History, Memory and the Family Album

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Making and preserving a family snapshot is an act of faith in the future. Looking back at these modest records, made precious and mysterious with age, is an act of recognition of the past. But interpreting family pictures poses a series of challenges to different pasts, as memory interweaves with private fantasy and public history. Dreams of home and a need for belonging come up against the conflicts and fragmentations of family history, indeed of overlapping family histories, since each individual – as daughter or son, spouse, parent, step-parent, grandchild, second spouse, aunt, uncle, and so on – moves through many family groupings.

A family album holds a profusion – a confusion – of pleasures and pains, as pictures old and new offer themselves up with deceptive innocence. Family collections are never just memories. Their disconnected points offer glimpses of many possible pasts, and yet, in our longing for narratives, for a way of telling the past that will make sense in the present we know, we strive to organise these traces, to fill in the gaps. Each viewer makes their own tracks through the album. Each new generation brings new perspectives, new understandings and new forgettings. For me that cheeky toddler may be an estranged brother; for you, the young man in football gear may be the elderly Australian relative you plan to visit. The laughing young mother may be sick or dead. No one may remember the proud old lady standing by her garden gate. Many faces are forgotten, and the fashions of earlier decades make us laugh. Yet the powerful claims made by family ties offer a structured framework to our sense of identity and community.

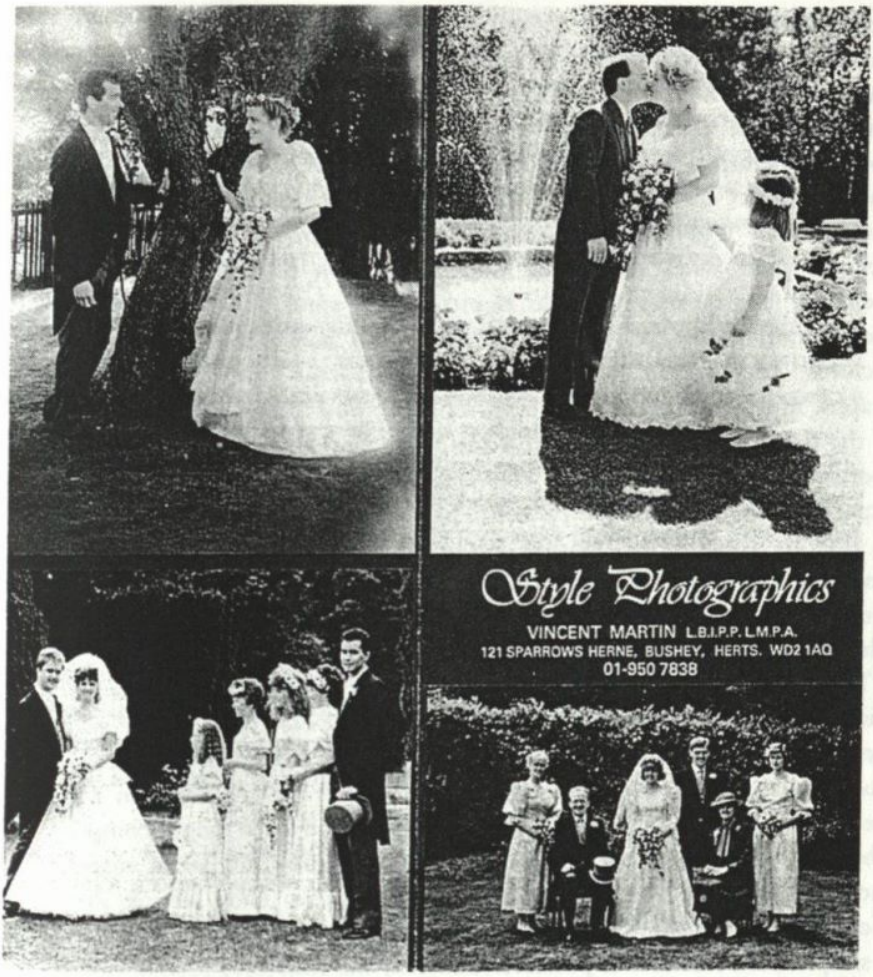
At a time when the family group – at least in the overdeveloped West – is fragmented and atomised, images continue to be produced which reassure us of its solidity and cohesion. The compulsive smiles in the snapshots of today insist on the exclusive claim of the family group to provide satisfying and enduring relationships, just as the calm dignity of earlier pictures emphasised the formality of family ties.[1]

Recording an event has become part of that event – and perhaps the most important part; for, however untidy or unsatisfactory the experience, we can ensure that the picture will project the appropriate emotions into the future. The children's party may bring tantrums, but the pictures will show laughter. The holiday may be spoilt by rain, but it will be the sunny days that make it to the family album. The longed-for cohesion of the family group is secured in the imagery, each individual moment set to take its place in the measured progress of the generations.

Unlike the social historian, the owner of an album does not look for the 'truth' of the past. Instead, we give it our own recognition, just as, when we make a picture, we commit our present to be recognised by an unknown future. Small wonder that a family album is a treasured possession, nervously approached for its ambiguities, scrutinised for its secrets, poignant in its recall of loves and lovers now dead. It interweaves the trivial and the intense, the moment and the momentous, as it challenges any simple concept of memory.

Everyone's family album contains a set of pictures which, at first glance, are familiar and predictable, beginning with the careful monochromatic poses of the turn of the century, then bursting from the covers under the sheer volume of informal snaps which tumble through today's letterboxes. Yet our 'own' family pictures, however ordinary, remain endlessly fascinating as we scrutinise them for exclusive information about ourselves. The images of relatives we never knew but whose influence is felt, reminders of the optimistic youth of our parents and their parents, these things seem to throw light on our present condition. And it is here that we find, amongst these many faces, the shocking image of our earlier selves. The experience is unparalleled, for, unlike the mirror-image – which, however intensely studied, is fleeting and can be retained only in a memory which may idealise or degrade – here we can gaze at layers of our past being. We see a child, an adolescent, a young adult, unfamiliar, held in place by someone else's lens. We tell ourselves, often with incredulity, that *this* is where *we* once were. This pictured body was once the centre from which we experienced the world. And we ask ourselves how our subjective memory can be aligned with the exterior image.

The intensity of one's own family photographs can never be matched by someone else's. We invest our own album with the weight of childhood experience, searching it for information, pouring into it our unfulfillable desires. We bring an emotional involvement as well as a practical knowledge to the people and events we find between its covers. Family photography does not seek to be understood by all. It is a private medium,



its simple imagery enriched by the meanings we bring to it. An 'outside' interpretation, an assessment of someone else's album, moves into a different realm: of social history, ethnology or a history of photography.

And yet, this most private of collections is also thoroughly public. Its meanings are social as well as personal – and the social influences the personal. Family photographs are shaped by the public conventions of the image and rely on a public technology which is widely available. They depend on shared understandings. Private interpretations which may subvert collective meanings are considered disruptive and discouraged. But above all, the personal histories they record belong to narratives on a wider scale, those public narratives of community, religion, ethnicity and nation which make private identity possible.

Snapshots for family albums are willingly restricted to modest public

codes and rarely aspire to technical or artistic merit. They have none of the pretensions of amateur photography which strives for aesthetic control of the medium. There is no attempt to conceal the process of picture-taking – participants present themselves directly to the camera in an act of celebratory co-operation. Everyone knows what to expect from a family picture. If subject matter or visual style breaches the conventions, the effect is less satisfactory. When high-street photographers are commissioned, it is because their work conforms. Experimentation or innovation are not welcome, and intrusive 'artistic' elements, or a naturalism that attempts to 'get behind the mask' would not keep faith with the client. Wedding pictures, perhaps the commonest of professionally made family photographs, must show certain symbolic moments and certain significant people to the best effect, or their point is lost. The fascination of such pictures is precisely this embrace of the conventions. Pictures which match up to expectations give enormous pleasure, partly because their familiar structure is able to contain the tension between the longed-for ideal and the ambivalence of lived experience. This is not to suggest that we should compare the image and 'reality', but that we are offered a framework within which our understandings of various realities can come into play.

The pictorial conventions of snapshot photography are dependent on widely accessible technology – cameras which are easy to use, films within the pocket of all but the poorest. The market dominance of Eastman Kodak, discussed in this book by Don Slater, has led to a situation where the sale of cameras and film is largely controlled by a single company, whose profits depend on responding to and shaping the use of snapshot photography as an important component of leisure. Their famous slogan 'You push the button, we do the rest' stressed their aim to make the process as simple and accessible as possible. Cameras and film have been developed with the family in mind.

Changes in technology have paralleled changes in the nature of both families and ideas about families in Western culture. As expectations have come to centre on the privatised security of the home, contemporary snapshots have been required to record the unguarded moments of domestic pleasure. Everyone wants pictures of their holiday – and these have been the easiest pictures to take, with bright sunlight, full-length figures and small groups. The coming of built-in flash has meant that snapshots have moved indoors and Christmas and birthday parties are added to the repertoire. Other types of picture are more difficult and need more complex equipment – hence we rarely see close-up portraits, shadowy interiors or larger groups among our snaps. Technological change influences the stories we tell ourselves about family life.

For most makers of snapshots, control stops with the moment of

exposure. The developing, cropping, printing – the manual involvement with the process which is all-important for other forms of photography – are here concealed and taken for granted. These pictures plop through the letterbox, as if delivering themselves up, just like that, completed by invisible or mechanical hands. Such immediacy confirms the illusion of innocence and transparency of the snapshot, as if a mere blink of the eye could transform the mundane retinal image into a sparkling picture, always properly exposed, in sharp focus and neatly contained within a 3½ × 5 inch border.

The 'naive' conventions of the 'private' snapshot, deeply embedded through participatory usage, are drawn on by 'public' modes – in particular advertising and publicity photography – which, unlike the snapshot, aim to be understood by as wide an audience as possible.

In many an advertisement, precious moments snatched from family life are isolated and heightened, purged of the irrelevancies and inconsistencies that go along with real snapshooting. In turn such multiplicities of perfected images, such immaculately happy families, themselves influence our domestic practice, teaching us how to stage our own pictures and perform for our own contemporary albums. The threading of public meanings through the private medium of family photography poses again and again the puzzle of the family album. Our understandings must shift from an 'inside' to an 'outside' perspective and back. Neither position has much to say to the other, but neither is enough by itself.

The family group remains a centre of fantasy – of romantic social fantasy, and of those fantasies which spring from our earliest infant lives. Family pictures are pulled into the service of these overlapping dreams – hence the ambivalence of the pleasures they give.

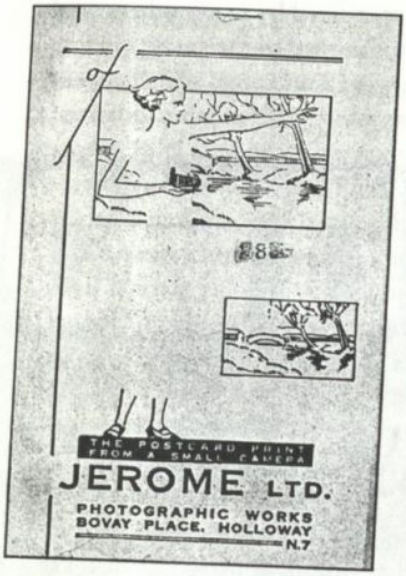
Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh have described how contemporary British society gives priority to an institution that is at best only partial and exists chiefly in what they call a 'familial' ideology which exerts pressure on public policy and social life.[2] Family albums echo that ideology as childhood and leisure times are obsessively recorded. The camera is part of a lifestyle based on house, garden and car which moulds the aspirations of the suburban nations of the prosperous West. In this vision, actual geographical location is of decreasing importance and the consumption of goods and services superficially claims to transcend class and restructure gender. For this is where the new father can build up a closer relationship with his children and take on some of the more pleasurable tasks of domesticity. This is the warm, exclusive, perfected family which today's snapshots seek to put on record – just like the ads.

But in our daily lives the bonds of family are crossed by many others, and even our familial experiences are by no means confined to the small, nuclear group. Although drawn together for the heightened moments which appear in albums, the different family members may well inhabit different 'worlds'. There are communities where women and men lead lives whose networks and social contacts hardly overlap. Members of different generations can be part of differing cultures, whether they have migrated across continents or remained a few streets from their origins. Family moments – even amongst those who come closest to the ideal – are only part of lives made up of school, work, interests, political action and institutional commitments, each bringing its own network of friends, companions and obligations. These other networks and solidarities are not made visible in the conventional family album. The worlds of production, politics, economic activity and the institutional settings of modern life – school, hospital, baby clinic – are only tangentially present. As Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh argue, 'the overvaluation of the family devalues other lives'.[3]

Often guarded by a self-appointed archivist, albums construct their own versions of family history, in negotiation with the ideal. Aware of the ever-present possibility of scandal, they will include significant moments and suitable family members and rigorously exclude others. Difficult individuals like divorced spouses and nonconforming siblings tend to be absent. Sickness, disease and disability are barely visible. Illegitimacy is concealed. Horrors which recent campaigns have shown to be all too frequent, like child abuse and wife beating, cannot be hinted at. Problems are suppressed, if only for the split second that the shutter is open.

We could ask: for whom is this image so carefully, so spontaneously manufactured? Family photography is not expected to be appreciated by outsiders, yet there is a need to produce the correct pictures, as if the audience were the public at large. Is each individual looking for their own ideal image? Are members of the group presenting themselves for each other, or for unknown 'others', for future generations? Is this a joint self-celebration, or is it a presentation of the imagined family group for the critical scrutiny of outsiders – even if those outsiders are never expected to see it?

Of course not all members of the family have the same relationship to the pictures in the album. The father is least visible, for it remains his role to handle the apparatus that controls the image, to point, frame and shoot. Yet from the earliest days advertisements for cameras have shown women behind the lens. This is, no doubt, a device to indicate how simple it is to take a snap; nevertheless it demonstrates a form of photography in which women are urged to participate. Even now it is difficult for a woman to become a fashion photographer, a photojournalist or an advertising photo-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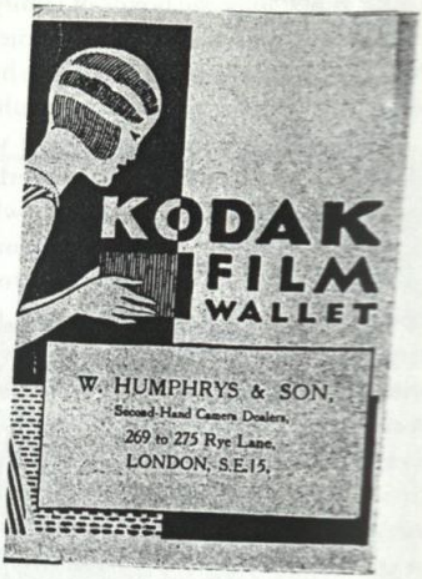
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grapher, but any woman can take a snapshot. Like preparing the meals and washing the clothes, this too, located in home and family, is sold as a domestic skill.

As the late twentieth century asserts yet again women's domestic role, the album underlines the ways in which home remains their particular sphere and the care of children their life's task. However, it is largely they who have become the historians, the guardians of memory, selecting and preserving the family archive. The continuity of women's stories has always been harder to reconstruct, but here, the affirmation of the everyday can itself reassert the coherence of women's memories. In her chapter, Claire Grey traces back seven generations of mothers and daughters and compares their lives.

Women have pioneered forms of writing about the past which explore areas tangential to the mainstream of political and economic change. As with other marginalised groups, forms which are themselves marginal, impure, apparently trivial have offered ways of seeing the past which insist on linking the personal with the political, the mundane with the great event, the trivial with the important. Blurring the boundaries between personal reminiscence, cultural comment and social history, paying attention to the overlap between history and fantasy, using popular entertainment, reading official histories between the lines and against the grain, these exploratory styles fit easily with the *bricolage* and loose ends of the family album. The majority of contributors to this book are working in this tradition.

The most ardent makers of family pictures are parents of young children. As adults we take some of our greatest pleasures from the next generation, but our meeting with our past selves on those earlier pages brings a very different response. As we leaf through our album, reviewing the different positions we have taken in the overlapping families pictured there, we may easily swerve from a sentimental nostalgia to an angry rejection of remembered pressures. The shifting perspectives on childhood compared across the generations become uneasy and contradictory. The album forces us to negotiate with our personal memories and offers an unpleasant jolt when memory does not correspond with image. 'We were not happy then,' we cry. 'Oh, yes,' others respond, 'you were. And here is a picture of you to prove it.' We may feel ourselves to have been on display, shown rather than showing, the pictures concealing our 'real' experience. Or the effectiveness of the disguise may be sufficiently disturbing to force us to question those very memories. Annette Kuhn and Simon Watney both explore these themes, showing us how family albums are about forgetting as well as remembering.

The social nature of family photography is subverted by readings which are too private, too individual, too difficult to deal with. Such readings of family snaps can rend apart their opaque and cheerful surface, as the unconscious – literally unspeakable – threatens the publicly secured privacy of the family group. The work of Jo Spence and Rosy Martin explores this space of disruptive meanings. By taking their childhood memories, as expressed in their family pictures, and working with them, they produce new images in a painful but illuminating and often witty visual commentary on family and photography.

Snapshots are part of the material with which we make sense of our wider world. They are objects which take their place amongst the other objects which are part of our personal and collective past, part of the detailed and concrete existence with which we gain some control over our surroundings and negotiate with the particularity of our circumstances. Snapshots contribute to the present-day historical consciousness in which our awareness of ourselves is embedded, part of what Zygmunt Bauman describes as the 'historical memory' of a group, 'ploughed into its collective actions, which finds expression in the group's proclivities to some rather than other behavioural responses, and is not necessarily recognised by the group as a particular concept of the past'.[4] In this collection of miniature tableaux the moments are disjointed and displaced, like a fading memory or one that has lost its organising links. But in the act of collection and handling, a sense of historical movement is produced. The principles of selection and arrangement are exercised to tell a story of progress or decline, to construct a sense of period and to hint at major historical shifts. It is never more than a hint, for in the album, when family and politics cross it is always family which takes priority, as if the politics could be denied. Major disruptions may be lived through, but personal relations dominate the images. Political change is embedded, rarely visible on the surface.

Capitalism, in its latest triumphant phase, requires high wages and stable populations arranged in centres of consumption. For the moment, the pared-down Western family group fits the bill. Old-style patriarchal conservatism is able to ally itself with new-style, free-market ideologies. But at the same time, the global economic system wrenches families apart as the need for low-paid workers and low-priced commodities creates unemployment and forces men and women to move between towns and across continents in search of security. This is where the tragedy and violence of economic change is lived through as people become migrant workers, immigrants, refugees, enforced spouses who must all travel, often illegally, to escape poverty or oppressive regimes. Leanne Klein writes on the trade in

brides from the Philippines, marketed through their photographs, their exploitation made possible through the linked ideologies of family, sexuality and racial superiority.

A discussion of ethnicity and cultural identity in relation to such upheavals is central to any consideration of the meaning of 'family' and the way families represent themselves to themselves and others through their photographs. The actuality of much family history is concerned less with continuity than with disruption, dispossession and cultural, religious and ethnic mixing. 'Critical theories are only just *beginning* to recognise and reckon with the kinds of complexity inherent in the culturally constructed nature of ethnic identities', write Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, arguing that 'race' will no longer do as a separate category.[5] Adeola Solanke, as a British Nigerian, discusses black people's use of family photography to reclaim links which have been broken by centuries of domination. Andrew Dewdney's 'More than Black and White' is a parallel set of family collections made by contemporary dwellers in Australia, which illustrates the interwoven complexities of shifts across continents, driven by trade, empire and war. This sort of historical exploration faces the challenges posed by comparison and juxtaposition, in contrast to the romantic obsession with 'roots' – particularly in the United States and the 'New World' – which searches back to Central Europe, Ireland and Africa for a lost authenticity.

The work of Andrew Dewdney and his collaborators shows how the groupings which make up families shift and re-form, unsettling any simple sense of continuity or locality. We continue to dream of home, but how do we place ourselves amongst our multiplying ancestors? The different 'homes' we are offered may each be as strange as the other.

Traditional family albums eschew such fluidity. There we find a series of judgements about who does and does not 'belong' to the group. In families where a lighter colour is valued, members with a darker skin may be pushed to the margins. As Benedict Anderson writes, 'Racism dreams of eternal contaminations',[6] a theme elaborated by Stuart Hall.

A modern contribution to the workings of race and ethnicity in family photographs is the increasing visibility of foreign travel. Even moderately prosperous Western families are following travel agents to more and more 'exotic' locations, and part of that experience is photographing the people they find there. The economic survival of parts of Southern Europe depends on the marketing of their landscape and their 'characters' as well as their tavernas, discos and beaches. The people of these regions must themselves be preserved, together with their culture, as quaint, colourful and entertaining. Just like the brides from the Philippines, they must sell themselves and their image, donning a mask of authenticity for the tourists' cameras.

Maggie Murray/Format

The commodification of people made possible by photography parallels the commodification of history made possible by representations of the past, including old family pictures. In the last twenty years there has been a revival of history from below, a history of everyday life and everyday consciousness. In this context domestic pictures have gained a new currency, contributing to a different sense of the past and different ways of exploring that past. The history workshop movements which have flourished in Britain since the 1970s have aimed to bring to light the history of previously excluded groups – women, black people, ethnic minorities. Jo Stanley's account of a photo-archive project in the London Borough of Wandsworth is an example of such work, seeking to reveal struggles at the micro level against forms of political, economic, race and gender domination. These are reread as political struggles, even though their participants do not recognise them as such. What is not clear from such work is how the experience of solidarity can be used to generalise rather than exclude. Any history of a local community must face up to intolerant, exclusive and racist behaviour. The documented memories of established white localities are very threatening to minority groups. A too-easy celebration of the concept of community can lead us to overlook such problems.

At the same time, a less political movement has been based on local history societies and family history networks. Local studies sections and

archives in libraries are increasingly giving domestic photographs and family albums an important place amongst their records. Journals of local history and family history flourish. But the more commercially minded 1980s moved hastily on to a commodification of nostalgia in which old family pictures play a part. They are displayed in museums and are up for sale in the antique shops and arcades which are a feature of British towns and villages newly reconstructed, with tourism in mind, as present-day replicas of their earlier selves.

The leisure-based trek to the countryside, within nations as well as on the overseas tourist circuit, has resulted in a folklorising of people and their image as well as of buildings and landscape. Here a vision of a nostalgic national and regional past is constructed which parallels the continuous family history dreamt of by many an album. It is a vision of separate but harmonious regional cultures: the Scottishness of Scotland, the antiquity of the City of London, the ruggedness of Cornish fishing villages – each is presented with its own history, as if uncontaminated by outside influence. The search for an 'English' heritage has led to more information, more writing and publication about localities than ever before. But the evocation is of 'precious and imperilled traces'[7] against a speeding-up of time and the all-consuming power of technology. The stately homes to visit, national parks to drive through, souvenirs to purchase, combine to give an impression of an ancient nation, a harmonious totality rooted in a distant, evocative, rural past rather than formed by a recent, urban, multiethnic, conflictual one. The meaning of 'community' is becoming folklorised.

This seductive vision of the past provides an easy structure within which to place more personal accounts. Family lore itself contains what Raphael Samuel describes as 'romantic primitivism', 'a yearning for the lost solidarities of the past'.[8] Family albums can lose their dangerous ambiguities to become part of an 'infrastructure of popular memory',[9] of popular accounts of history – through novels, films, television – which reinforce a sense of national and cultural identity. It is in family rituals that 'our' ways of doing things, 'our way of life', is acted out.

In his famous commentary on history and memory, Walter Benjamin wrote: 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'[10] The difference between a folkloric sense of the past and one which is dynamic in the present is at the heart of the discussions in this book. It is the difference between an antique shop past, with its smell of new wax polish accompanying fading prints in dark wooden frames, and one's own past, with its ambivalent and uneasy memories. Family photography can operate at this junction between personal memory and social history, between public myth and personal

unconscious. Our memory is never fully 'ours', nor are the pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. Looking at them we both construct a fantastic past and set out on a detective trail to find other versions of a 'real' one.

Much has been made of the destabilising recognition that there can be no final, 'true' history to be discovered. However, there are other histories to be written, embedded in the old, interpreting, reconstructing, making sense of events in less dominant ways. Against a folkloric 'people's history' which leaves the power politics of official histories untouched is the recognition of politics in another form, working itself out through the detail of everyday life and reclaimed from records, like snapshots, which are outside the authority of legitimised knowledge. Homi Bhabha writes: 'Interpretation is the first condition of empowerment and it may be the last word of tyranny', even though 'the politics of interpretation are dangerous and ambivalent'.[11] Family photography may both conceal and reveal, but its investigation can never end with the closed circle it appears to represent. We are always returned to an interpretative community and faced with the recognition of difference and dissent. ◆