

Cromwell Tower, King's College

George Aubourne Clarke - cloud photographer extraordinary

G. A. Clarke (1879-1949) was truly 'known the world over' in the first half of the 20th century for his cloud photographs, taken mainly from the Cromwell Tower, or *The University Observatory* as he preferred to call it. His photographs adorned not only the International Cloud Atlas of 1930 (the publication that defined different cloud types) but were reproduced in Admiralty manuals, meteorological manuals and scores of books, journals and magazines¹. His own well illustrated book on 'Clouds' published in 1920² was a reference for decades.



The Cromwell Tower had had a rôle as a meteorological observatory since 1868 and Clarke's position was that he was the 'observer' there from 1903 to 1943. The Tower was one of 7 pioneering stations that comprised the first national network of meteorological observing stations in Britain. Notice the historic weather vane and 4-cup Robinson anemometer that was installed in 1868 still spinning on the roof. Clarke had been trained at Kew Observatory and his responsibility was to telegraph observations, some daily and some hourly though made by self-recording instruments, to London. This he had to do 7 days a week, from early morning until evening, no easy job. Between taking readings, the flat leaded roof of the Cromwell Tower with clear vistas in all directions provided an excellent place for Clarke to set up his camera.



Clouds are transient in their form and the process of developing plates at the beginning of the 20th century was a lot longer than many a cloud kept its position and shape. There was no quick feedback on the success of any picture taken. Moreover, to show good contrast between cloud and sky that colour sensitive eyes see without a problem required the use of well-chosen filters in conjunction with the black and white plates of the era. Clarke had to develop the science of cloud photography, which he did with great effect³.



Clarke had not only an eye for the technical niceties of clouds but an artistic eye too. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society in 1917 and was the first recipient of their Hood medal in 1933, awarded for an 'exhibit which revealed the most outstanding advance in photography for

public service'⁴. Edwin H. Land, who had invented polarizing filters by then but not Polaroid cameras, received the medal in the following year. Clarke was elected a Fellow of the Royal Meteorological Society in 1919 and, more locally, was President of the Aberdeen Photographic Society from 1931 to 1934. The final picture shows Aubourne Clarke beside the bellows camera on the roof of the Cromwell Tower taking photographs during the eclipse of June 1927.

The Air Ministry was formed near the end of the First World War and the Cromwell Tower observatory was taken over by the Meteorological Office, Air Ministry soon after the war. Aubourne Clarke trained and supervised an enlarged core of observers who had more duties. He had to retire due to illness in 1943 and did not fully recover. The Cromwell tower continued to be used as an observatory until 1947. By then Dyce airport, founded in 1934, had become the obvious centre for local meteorological observations.

John S. Reid

¹ Obituary of George Aubourne Clarke, Quarterly Journal of the Royal Meteorological Society, pp 439-441, vol. 75 (1949).

² Geo Aubourne Clarke "*Clouds: a descriptive illustrated guide-book to the observation and classification of clouds*", Constable & Co. , London, 1920.

³ Geo. Aubourne Clarke "*Cloud Forms and the Scientific Study thereof*"The Photographic Journal, pp195-203 (June 1917).

⁴ Royal Photographic Society <http://www.rps.org/annual-awards/Hood-Medal> .