

PHOTOGRAPHIC ART & HISTORY

NEWSLETTER NO.1

WELLINGTON, N.Z.

MAY 1970

- * The preservation of early New Zealand photographs
- * The appreciation of fine photography, not only for technical and aesthetic qualities but also for human and social relevance of content.
- * The collection of cameras and other vintage and classic photographic equipment and materials
- * The history of photography.

In New Zealand these have so far been the enthusiasms of individuals in isolation from each other. Recently, in Wellington at least, informal groups have started to come together, but in general enthusiasts are still isolated and often unaware even of the existence of others. This newsletter is being produced in an effort to open up a line of communication and to act as a clearing-house for information. The first issue, which we hope will not also be the last, will give an outline of what we know has been done and what we hope can be achieved. It's being sent to individuals, organisations and institutions we think might be interested, but there are undoubtedly others we don't know about; if you know about them, please pass the newsletter on. If you're doing anything in any of the above fields, send us details for inclusion in future issues.

Above all, if you're interested, fill in and return the form on the last page. If the response is sufficient, we'll try to publish on a regular basis, perhaps in a form which will include some of the photography in which we're interested.

B.W.

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EARLY NEW ZEALAND PHOTOGRAPHS

Many of these are being preserved, but many more have been lost or destroyed or are in danger of loss or destruction. Of those which remain many are not properly catalogued and are not getting the care necessary to stop deterioration. The ultimate goal is a National Photographic Archive, staffed by people with a full appreciation and knowledge of historical photographs. At present, the burden falls on a few individuals and institutions, not all of whom have the knowledge to do the job properly.

To the historian, these old photographs can be of great value, not only as illustrations for historical publications but also as source material in themselves. The human observer notes only those aspects of the contemporary scene which he regards as significant; his very perception is necessarily limited. The camera suffers no such limitations; it records not only those things which a human observer might regard as significant but also those which he regards as not significant but which future generations will regard as being of great significance.

Photographically too, these early prints and negatives are of great value. Many were made with such craftsmanship and clarity of creative vision that they are more than mere records of time past; they approach art far more closely than does most of the salon and exhibition photography which for the past hundred years has dogged the efforts of photography to be recognised as a unique art in its own right.

Considerable work in this field is being done by John Turner, photographer at the Dominion Museum. At the moment John is preparing for the Museums and Art Galleries Association a National Register of Photographic Archives, a list of all the public and private collections of early photographs in New Zealand. This could be regarded as the first step towards the establishment of a National Archive, but the task is immense.

For instance, John has traced the names of 78 professional photographers who were working in this country in the late 1880's. The negative collections of only eight of these photographers are known to be extant.

Going back even further, no-one seems to know for sure just who was New Zealand's first photographers. A fair number of photographs survive from the 1850's, but what of the 40's? Some research in this field has been done by Bill Main, Tutor in Photography at Wellington Polytechnic. Bill has discovered that there was a photographer active for a few months in 1842 in Wellington. This man later moved to Wanganui, but nothing more is known about him. In later newsletters we'll tell you more about this photographer, and maybe someone can dig up more details and maybe something on other pioneers.

It is more than likely that other practitioners of photography settled in, or at least visited, New Zealand in the 1840's which as well as being the first decade of organised settlement in New Zealand was also the first decade of photography. As soon as the first practical processes were announced in 1839 the new art became one of the great public crazes of the western world, so there must have been at least a handful of photographers on the many ships which came to New Zealand. But equally, there were probably not many. The two principal inventors of photography, Fox Talbot and Daguerre, kept a close hold on licences to practice their processes in England, where most New Zealand immigrants came from, and English patents held good for the colonies as well. However, control over patents must have been limited in faraway New Zealand, and there were many daguerreotypists in America which had strong contacts with New Zealand from the earliest days of European contact.

The first task, in which anybody may get the chance to help, is the fundamental one of ensuring that collections of prints or negatives, even those made well into this century, do not get carted off to the rubbish dump. If you think that's putting it too strongly, consider the

case of 'Joe Zak', one of Wellington's most prolific professional photographers of the first decades of the century. He died only a few years ago, and his widow offered his collection to a number of institutions which shall be nameless because they were apparently not interested. John Turner heard about the collection a week after it was taken to the dump.

The lesson is that merely telling your local museum or art gallery or library is not enough; most of these institutions do not have staff with knowledge or appreciation of historical photographs sufficient to enable them to judge the value of what is offered. If you hear of the death or retirement of a professional or amateur photographer whose work goes back over many years, pass the word on to someone who will do something about the photographs. If you know of, or possess yourself, a collection of old photographs, pass the word on to John Turner so the collection can be listed in the Register of Photographic Archives. Above all, make sure that no collection of early prints or negatives is destroyed.

In later issues of the newsletter we hope to describe some of the available collections. These include most of the collection of the Burton Brothers and Muir and Moodie, Dunedin photographers who in the late 19th and early 20th centuries took literally thousands of photographs of all parts of New Zealand, including areas then remote and almost unexplored. Fortunately, this magnificent collection is among those preserved in the Dominion Museum. We also hope to describe some early books of photographs of New Zealand, some of which date back to the early 1860's and are the ancestors of today's coffee table books. The photography in some of these is magnificent, so they're worth keeping an eye out for yourself. And look out for the exhibition "Maori in Focus", prepared by John Turner, which is at present touring New Zealand. Some of the prints from the exhibition were published in the April 1970 issue of the magazine "Affairs".

THE APPRECIATION OF FINE PHOTOGRAPHY

New Zealand has no established forum through which those who regard photography as more than a technical process for producing pretty pictures can see and discuss the work of the World's and New Zealand's significant photographers. Existing organisations, amateur and professional, generally have a severely limited approach to photography, and New Zealand has no journal comparable with Switzerland's "Camera" or England's "Creative Camera." Through these and through other more general magazines published elsewhere, people in this country can become acquainted with fine photography, but there is no ready outlet for such work by New Zealand photographers and no organisation through which interested persons can get together to develop their awareness of the possibilities of the art.

Are there in New Zealand enough interested people to make worthwhile the publication of such a journal or even the formation of such an organisation? This newsletter is one effort to find out. So even if you've no deep interest in the historical side, and are concerned with photography here and now, please get in touch with us.

In Wellington, and we hope in a few other centres as well, a few people are managing to get together to spread the word about fine photography. John Turner and Des Kelly, of the Wellington Teachers' College, have been organising film and discussion evenings, using the resources of the National Film Library. The first evening included a film on Edward Weston, and a filmed discussion between Ansel Adams and Beaumont Newhall who compared and evaluated the work of the great photographers. The second evening saw a film on the work of Dorothea Lange. As well as the films, audiences have been able to see actual prints by photographers from Fox Talbot to Edward Weston and Paul Strand.

The National Film Library has a reasonable selection of films on photography and in later newsletters we'll give an evaluation of those we've seen. The one on Weston, incidentally, is very good indeed.

For those who cannot wait, the Film Library will supply a list of its holdings.

The International Fund for Concerned Photography

This organisation, established in the United States four years ago in memory of the great photographers Werner Bischof, Robert Capa and David Seymour, is worth considering in the light of what this newsletter is trying to achieve in the promotion of fine photography and the preservation of early photographs. A few quotes from Fund's programme and statement of aims are worth repeating. The Fund seeks to promote:

"...photography as a tool of social conscience and for the exploration of beauty."

Its' general aim is to:

"...encourage and assist photographers of all ages and nationalities who are vitally concerned with their world and times. It aims not only to find and help new talents but also to uncover and preserve forgotten archives and to present such work to the public."

Of itself, the Fund says:

"The International Fund for Concerned Photography is a unique creative force; its very name denotes its direction. The fund came into existence during a decade of tumultuous changes in the arts, in communications media, in photography - in the world as a whole. Its goals are essential for the creation and maintenance of the visual history of our century and for the use of this most powerful eyewitness/art-communications medium, respecting its individuality integrity and quality.

"The Fund fosters the most immediate, contemporary and popular, yet least supported, of art and communication forms. It encourages photographers to depict and present and to assist and supplement the work of those in other disciplines who are equally concerned with the future of mankind. In addition it works to rescue from oblivion and to preserve the work of the past which is fast disappearing through chemical decay, simple neglect

and ignorance of its existence. Through this programme of conservation the fund also helps to instil and ensure the quality and integrity of photography in the present and for the future."

Although basically an American institution the Fund has affiliates in several other countries. Associated with it are not only many of today's great photographers but also a number of prominent people from the academic world, the arts, and the communications media. The Fund has organised comprehensive programmes in America and elsewhere of travelling exhibitions of important photography and lectures on photography.

A possibility worth thinking about is the eventual establishment of a New Zealand affiliate of the Fund. This newsletter has already spoken about the urgent need to preserve the photographic records of New Zealand's past. "Concerned photography" of the present is something to be considered too; we may not have many "concerned photographers" but there are a few. Ans Westra's photography of the modern Maori is one example which springs to mind. There are others, and probably some undiscovered; surely New Zealand's social problems and protest movements have produced photographers who have managed to make effective and relevant use of the art, if only for private expression of their feelings.

But remember, this newsletter is concerned with all good photography, not just the use of the art for sociological and historical documentation. We want to know where our good photographers are, and to promote their work as best we can.

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CAMERA COLLECTING

This is one field of photographic history which is being well looked after in New Zealand. Although as far as we know there are only a few collections, one or two are outstanding and if all were taken together the result would be a collection which would rank with the world's best. Once again, the problem is that not all collectors know each other, and it's hoped this newsletter will help them get in contact with each other for the purposes of

buying, selling, swapping and the general correspondence and discussion which are the collectors' lifeblood. In this issue brief mention will be made of the collections we know of; in future issues we hope to give more details of these collections, and to describe other collections as they come to our notice. Written contributions from collectors will be more than welcome.

Probably the outstanding collection of photographic equipment in this country is that of Bruce Watt, who has established a magnificent museum above his photographic studio in Palmerston North. Bruce has hundreds of cameras and other items, some very old, others classics of more recent vintage.

Another private collection, smaller but of great interest, is that owned by Bill Main. Bill is a connoisseur of all sorts of Victoriana, and the photographic side of his collection is concerned mainly with cameras made before 1920. Many of them are very rare and interesting.

A. Masterton professional photographer, George Nikolaison, also has an excellent collection of moderate size. Smaller private collections are being built up by Wayne Shepperd, of 22 Harbour View Road, Lower Hutt, and Bruce Weatherall, of 29 Wyndrum Ave., Lower Hutt, who is concentrating mainly on folding Kodaks.

Public collections do not present quite so encouraging a picture. Probably the best is that at the Auckland Museum of Transport and Technology, but at last report cataloguing was lagging sadly behind the flood of extremely interesting donations. The problem here has apparently been the lack of anyone with specialist knowledge in this field. In Wellington the Dominion Museum collection is fairly small, although it has one or two very interesting items, space considerations mean it's not on public display. Pressure of other work has prevented John Turner, who's in charge of it, from giving it the attention it deserves.

We want to publicise all collections, however small, of cameras and anything else to do with photography, so if you have a collection, get in touch with us.

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THE HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

New Zealand may be a fruitful field in which to search for the work of the great 19th century photographers, both the pioneers and those who later became famous. Because practical photographic processes were being developed in Europe at the start of the era of New Zealand colonisation it's a reasonable assumption that the settlers brought with them, or had sent out to them, photographs to remind them of the people and places they left behind. Already there are a few daguerrotypes and ambrotypes in the hands of private collectors, but none of these that we know of bear the names of any of the important figures in the early history of photography. But an exciting discovery was made a short time ago by John Turner, who found in the Auckland museum some calotypes by Fox Talbot. These were neatly catalogued and filed away in a large envelope, but were otherwise unpublicised.

John also possesses a carte-de-visite by the famous 19th century English photographer Henry Peach Robinson. A feature of this photograph is that on the back of it are listed the salon and exhibition awards won by Robinson. Bill Main has a book on Studio construction and management published by Robinson in 1898.

A possibility well worth investigation is whether, somewhere in Dunedin, there are any photographs by the great Scottish photographers David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, who in the opinion of the historian Helmut Gernsheim produced the finest photography of the 19th century. The collaboration between Hill, the artist, and Adamson, the scientist, arose from Hill's personal commitment to produce a massive painting depicting the signing of the Act of Demission by which the Free Church of Scotland broke away from the Established Church in 1843.

Over the next four years Hill and Adamson took hundreds of photographs of the members of the Church who signed the document; Hill used these photographs as sketches to help him produce the painting, but they proved to be magnificent photography by almost any standard. Hill and Adamson also produced some fine landscapes and pictures of Edinburgh.

The Otago settlement was founded in 1848 by members of the Free Church of Scotland; in fact the Reverend Thomas Burns who with Captain Cargill led the Settlers was one of the ministers who signed the Act of Demission and was almost certainly photographed by Hill and Adamson. It would appear likely that the Otago settlers brought with them a few Hill and Adamson photographs, especially as these were made by the calotype process from which many prints could be made, unlike the "one-off" daguerreotype process. Are there any of these calotypes tucked away somewhere in the Otago Settlers Museum, the Hocken Library or elsewhere in Dunedin?

There are other possibilities. Did any daguerreotypes by Daguerre make their way to Akaroa? Did any of the soldiers who came to New Zealand during the Maori Wars bring with them any of Roger Fenton's Crimean War photographs? Did any of the men and women who flocked to New Zealand in the goldrushes of the 1860's and later bring with them any photographs? Many of the miners came from America, so there's the possibility of a picture or two by Matthew Brady or Timothy O'Sullivan for instance.

There are many such questions, many possibilities. Perhaps affirmative answers to these questions are already known by someone. If so, we'd like to hear. And even if the answers are not known, perhaps all that's needed is for someone to look.

This newsletter has been sent free of charge to everyone we think might be interested. We want to keep it going through further issues, as we think it fills a great need. To be able to do this, we must have people who want to receive the newsletter. We should be able to finance another issue ourselves, but ultimately we hope to be able to put it on a subscription basis so that we can afford proper printing which will allow a good reproduction of photographs. Good-quality modern printing processes are relatively cheap, especially for large press runs, so if enough people are willing to subscribe we may be able to send the newsletter out at ten or fifteen cents a copy. So if you're interested, fill in and return the form below. If you could also send a stamped self-addressed envelope, or even just a 2½cent stamp it would save us a bit on postage and stationery costs. Although we're probably New Zealand's most uncertain advertising medium, we are also prepared to help our limited finances by offering classified advertising at two cents a word or a dollar a quarter page, payment to accompany advertisement and to be returnable in full in the (we hope) unlikely event of non-publication.

And remember, pass the word, and the newsletter, around. The more potential subscribers there are, the more cheaply we can produce a better newsletter.

Bruce Weatherall,
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LOWER HUTT

I would like to receive further copies of the "Photographic Art and History" newsletter. I am interested in:

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

