

# GEOFFREY POWELL'S *FAMILY GROUP*

## the image that made and broke a photographer

Craig Hoehne discusses the career of Geoffrey Powell and how it was affected by his iconic 1945 image of a family waiting to be evicted

One particular image by Sydney newspaper photographer Geoffrey Powell (1918–1989) stands out—*Family Group*, also known as *Families Awaiting Eviction* (1945). Within people's minds, it is the image that assumes overarching prominence in his work. First published in the inaugural issue of *Contemporary Photography*, November–December 1946, it accompanied Powell's provocatively titled article, 'Photography—A Social Weapon'. This commentary championed realism as a way to photographically engage social issues. The juxtaposing of the photograph and the text helped *Family Group* to achieve iconic status for a new generation of photographers, including David Moore who, in 2001, easily recalled Powell's *Family Group* from 50 years before.

Powell also submitted three photographs, including *Family Group*, to the prestigious *Australian Photography 1947* competition. The others were *Truants* (1946) and *Delegates at Political Conference* (1945).



All were accepted and published in the *Australian Photography 1947* annual. *Family Group* was further honoured with one of seven bronze medallions, designed by sculptor Lyndon Dadswell (1908–1986), the distinctive front piece featuring a crouching photographer and the verso a stylised Aboriginal motif. Through *Family Group* Powell had finally begun to receive the recognition he so dearly craved.

Ten years on, in *Australian Photography 1957*, Laurence Le Guay lamented that local documentary photography had concentrated too much on the negative aspects of society, citing Geoffrey Powell, amongst others. Yet somewhat ironically, it was Le Guay above all, who promoted Powell's *Family Group* through his publications. This prominence extended to a 1949 issue of *Contemporary Photography* in the article 'As others see us!'—a critique where *Family Group* was discussed under the heading of 'documentary'. It also

above:  
Geoffrey Powell (1918–1989)  
*Families Awaiting Eviction*, 1945  
gelatin silver photograph;  
33.0 x 33.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3305738

below left:  
This *Australian Photography 1947* gold medallion is identical to the one awarded to Geoffrey Powell. It was the work of Lyndon Dadswell (1908–1986) and was awarded to Axel Poignant and gifted to the Library by Mrs Roslyn Poignant. Manuscript Collection  
PIC OJB A40010392





above left:  
Geoffrey Powell (1918–1989)  
*Truants, 1946*  
gelatin silver photograph  
33.0 x 33.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3305741



above right:  
Geoffrey Powell (1918–1989)  
*Delegates at Political Conference, 1945*  
gelatin silver photograph  
33.0 x 33.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3305743

appeared that same year in Le Guay's *A Portfolio of Australian Photography*, a selection of the 70 best images that had been published in issues of *Contemporary Photography*. This coverage helped provide *Family Group* with the exposure needed to become influential within the emerging genre of social documentary. It stands as Powell's most published and recognisable image. An understanding of Powell within the post-war documentary movement is grounded through this image and through its association with the rhetoric espoused in 'Photography—A Social Weapon'. Here the myth of Geoffrey Powell as a documentary photographer directly concerned with social issues was born. His photography of the period is politically charged, conforming to the precepts of Socialist Realism. That is to say it carries a Marxist–Leninist message, as opposed to the objective social analysis seen in purist documentary.

Although Powell's photography has essentially been seen through *Family Group*, its style and the subject portrayed are not representative of his wider body of work. His main work of the period was for the communist newspaper *Tribune*. All Powell's 'Trib' photography was assigned through the news editor Rupert Lockwood, with little space given to themes of urban poverty, unless a topical newsworthy story presented itself. So too, the style reflected in *Family Group* is different to

that of Powell's contemporaneous news reportage which overwhelmingly adopted a particularly straight aesthetic. Figure–ground relationships were characteristically treated with equal importance, anchoring human subjects to the broader context of their immediate environment.

*Family Group* is altogether different. The figures are tightly framed so as to edit out the general surroundings. The companion negative, discovered in 2001 and never before printed, depicts a wider scope more in tune with Powell's environmental approach. With the broader scene depicted, the circumstance behind *Family Group's* alternative title, *Families Awaiting Eviction*, becomes immediately apparent. A well-dressed man stands at the dwelling's entrance, symbolising the loathsome face of officialdom; one of his enforcers positions himself at one side and another casually reclines against the dilapidated front fence, seemingly oblivious to the families' despair. The context and scale of the broader scene are contrasted with the ambiguity presented by the established but more stylised *Family Group*.

Intriguingly, in his memoirs *Worms in a Tin* (1986–1988), Powell provides little insight into the creation of his most successful photograph. He signals the depiction of an eviction in progress as a sad event, simply chanced upon when walking back to the *Tribune's* offices. These were located in

Haymarket, quite close to Sydney's Central Railway Station, perhaps indicating that the location was one of Sydney's neglected inner working-class suburbs nearby, such as Surrey Hills, Erskineville or Redfern.

A transcript of an interview contained in Powell's ASIO file links *Family Group* to a series of images produced as part of his *Tribune* duties. However, none of these images was actually published by the paper. Instead, they were expressly made as a Socialist Realist concept series for the *History of Australian Labor* exhibition, as part of the Communist Party's 25th anniversary celebrations, and timed to follow the 14th National Congress, 10–12 August 1945 in Sydney. The exhibition opened at Marx School on 13 August. Powell mentioned that the series was put together just prior to the Congress. This locates *Family Group* as most likely having been created in early August 1945.

*Worms in a Tin* does, however, discuss two other images from the congress series—*Delegates at Political Conference* and *Making a Speech*. These were elaborately contrived compositions using Party members as actors. *Making a Speech* was stylistically based on the iconic American illustration, *Freedom of Speech* (1943) by Norman Rockwell. Powell found Rockwell's painting in a past issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* and adapted the basic composition for the Communist Party. In 'Camera Art', an article written for the Communist Party's arts and science magazine *Australia's Progress* in September 1945, Powell writes in reference to *Delegates at Political Conference*, articulating something of his working philosophy: 'This posed photograph shows the necessity for observation power required to re-create an event so that its authenticity is accentuated'. Powell's photography has generally been viewed as a strict social documentary, underpinned by a determinedly purist outlook. The controversial advocating of posed compositions to represent reality certainly clashes with the ethos of more renowned contemporaries, like David Moore who believed

that 'once you start altering facts within a picture, you undermine the strength of photography'.

Powell's stance proffers some interesting questions as to the creative methodology behind other images from the same series, in particular, *Family Group*. This image became a defining symbol of Australian social conscience photography, a 1940s documentary archetype. Then again, in accordance with Powell's idea of authentic re-creations, such as *Delegates at Political Conference* and *Making a Speech*, could this eviction scene have been a dramatised event, using Communist Party members as cast protagonists? This is not fully verifiable; however, the ambivalence presented by the question leaves room for informed viewers to interpret the image for themselves.

Further insight about the creation of *Family Group* can be garnered from technical information. Powell used a 4 x 4 format Rolleiflex camera for all his *Tribune* work. This was limited to a 60 mm 'normal' focal length lens, producing a fixed working



above:  
Geoffrey Powell (1918–1989)  
*Geoffrey Powell Self Portrait, 1937*  
gelatin silver photograph;  
38.0 x 30.3 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3305733

below:  
Geoffrey Powell (1918–1989)  
*Families Awaiting Eviction, 1945 [2]*  
gelatin silver photograph  
33.0 x 33.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-vn3305740





Jill White  
*David Moore at Kilcare* c.1985  
b&w photograph;  
27.8 x 27.6 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an23218609  
Courtesy Jill White

angle-of-view of 35 degrees. Consequently, in order to frame the family group, Powell would have needed to get in quite close. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the image has a relatively shallow depth-of-field, the near distance of which falls off at the veranda boards in the foreground. In addition, published data gives a working lens aperture of f8 and, considering the lens focal length, also indicates a fairly close camera to subject distance. The perspective achieved and the low camera position lends a monumental dimension to the figures huddled together, as if to emulate the cramped living conditions experienced by poor working class families. To frame his subject, Powell must have intruded into the scene, perhaps going so far as to lean over the front fence, or even to venture inside the yard. It seems unlikely that *Family Group* was made on the run unobtrusively, in the classic Henri Cartier-Bresson style.

Kudos from the *Australian Photography 1947* award extended to a congratulatory note from Stanley Hawes, producer-in-chief at the films division of the Department of Information, where Powell then worked as a cinematographer. Powell was given leave to attend the award ceremony in

Newcastle, timed to coincide with that city's June 1948 sesquicentenary celebrations. He subsequently submitted *Delegates at Political Conference* and *Family Group*, now titled *Family Group Awaiting Eviction* to the newly launched *AM*, or *Australia Magazine*, in July 1948. The article 'Photography Discovers the People' opens with: 'Australian photographers are turning from romanceism to realism'. Frank Browne, noted Catholic journalist and editor of the anti-communist scandal sheet *Things I Hear*, in his review 'GREAT STUFF', called Powell to task on the creation of the *Australia Magazine* imagery. To Powell's chagrin, Browne highlighted the fact that *Delegates at Political Conference* actually depicted a Communist Party Congress, further asserting that both photographs 'were communist propaganda shots and taken as such'. Given the dictates surrounding their original unveiling in direct association with communist cant, it was a fair assessment. The commentary forced the coming-out of Powell's previous photographic work for the Communist Party press.

'GREAT STUFF' was unwelcome publicity. The calculated words, cloaked within an atmosphere of pervasive cold-war tension, served as bullets within the politically sensitive Department of Information. According to Powell, he was promptly sacked from the Department, but was reinstated after film unit colleagues lobbied management. Embittered by the experience, Powell recoiled from all further activity in stills photography, only revisiting the medium in 1964 and from outside Australia's shores.

CRAIG HOEHNE is a working photographer and photographic printer. He has been researching the life and work of Geoffrey Powell since 2001. In 2004, he produced and curated a mini-retrospective *Reintroducing Geoffrey Powell: Australia's Forgotten Documentary Photographer* and also *The Amenities Campaign Exhibition*, for which he used Powell's negatives originally produced for the Miners' Federation industrial campaign for better amenities in the coalfields in 1947. Hoehne is currently working on a documentary project about Tasmania's timber industry