

AUSTRALIA'S WILD PLACES

ROGER McDONALD REVEALS HOW LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY HAS A
SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP TO THE IDEA OF WILDERNESS

Richard Green (b.1940)
*Ragged Range, Kimberley,
Western Australia* 2005
Epson Ultrachrome K3 print
405.0 x 102.3 cm
Pictures Collection
Courtesy Richard Green

OVER A CENTURY AGO, THE OUTDOOR camera was a bulky piece of equipment, involving the transport of developing materials—glass plates and chemicals—through bush and over mountains, along rivers and into deserts.

Looking back from the present age of lightweight digital cameras to the era of the packhorse or camel, T-Model Ford, early aeroplane, polar sailing vessel and well-worn walking boot, it is tempting to portray Australia's earliest landscape photographers as adventurers, discoverers and explorers.

As so they were, in many ways; if not always in the literal meaning of being the first to visit the places they photographed, then certainly in the sense that they returned with pictures of remote places to feed the avid interest of those who viewed them. An explorer always brings home a report: from their own huge backyard, early Australian photographers brought news of the little known. Scenic photography gave to urban-living Australians a sense of the dramatically beautiful wilderness that was the largest part of Australia.

The National Library of Australia has in its collections a wealth of images of Australia's wilderness. Some of the pictures were taken for printing as commercial postcards; some in the course of scientific expeditions; some as artistic compositions; some as a record of industrial and mining work; others on commercial assignment for newspapers, photo-magazines and books and others still as personal snapshots. All were taken under the spell of wild Australia, the earliest ones when the idea of preserving wilderness was hardly credible, the most recent when wilderness-thinking has come to the forefront in ideas of a sustainable earth.

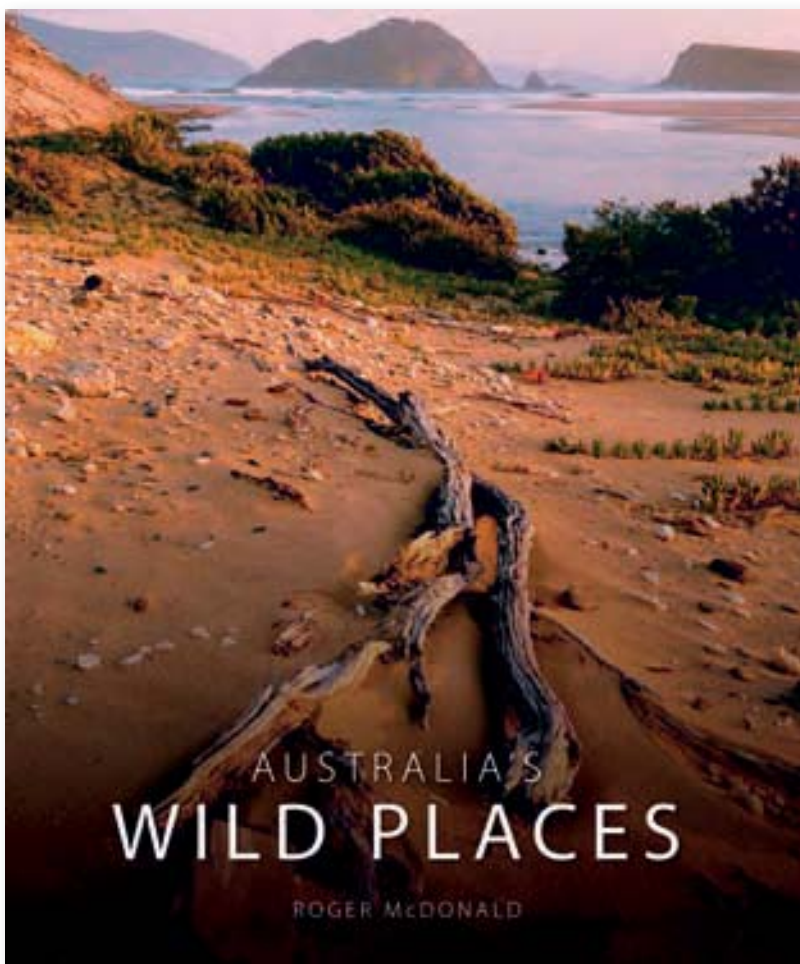
Sometimes it seems that the camera's view presents as many edges or wilderness dividing lines as there are wilderness definitions available. Scientists, activists and environmental philosophers have varying, sometimes competing, ideas of what makes a wilderness, with the idea of a large enough area of land to qualify as a self-sustaining unity being uppermost. Photographs contribute an intuitive feeling about wilderness



which is hardly measurable but which remains a powerful, indeed possibly the strongest, defence of their worth.

Landscape photography has a special relationship to the idea of wilderness. It has shaped, and continues to shape, our sense of what a wilderness can be, where it is, and where it touches what we know. Landscape photographs can suggest, sometimes surprisingly, our connection to wilderness, even when we are far removed from wild places. This connection has a spiritual meaning. To talk about the spiritual qualities of wilderness is to feel a relation to everything seen or touched—textures of bark, colours of leaves, patterns of watercourses and wind marks on sand, signs of drought, the ancient drama of rocky heights, plunging gorges, cloud reflected in water, clear burning skies and starry nights where the light of human habitation is not seen anywhere. More than we realise, the realities of bitter soils and brilliant adaptations—hope against hope of survival— influence and make the Australian character. The voice of the landscape is marked in the Australian accent and habits of mind.

A landscape photograph is always taken at the edge of somewhere, the object or place captured being its undeniable subject. Looking out from an edge into a receding beyond, such as in Peter Dombrovskis' *Evening at Louisa Bay, South Coast, Southwest Tasmania, 1983*, means that a deepening sense of mystery and wonder is almost always contained in a landscape photograph. No matter how beautifully (in Dombrovskis' case) or even how plainly, a landscape photograph is composed as an image of observable reality.



When early humans looked out from their ring of fire to see the eyes of man-eaters looking back at them, their idea of wilderness was of a place apart. This meaning of wilderness has never changed—it is our feelings about the place apart that have changed. Wilderness means whatever lies just beyond human reach—a region that is uncultivated, uninhabited and often inhospitable; in today's terms, a protected storehouse of biodiversity and natural processes. If the invention of photography has one overriding lesson, it is that, since the development of the camera, nowhere is out of reach. Once our fears drew the line; they still do, but widened somewhat, and the camera is always there to remind us of what we might take or let slip from the physical and spiritual resource that is wilderness.

Frank Hurley's glass-plate camera, standing by itself in the middle of a baking-hot Kimberley landscape with its light-proof hood slithered to the ground, has a rather disingenuous air, as if the absence of the photographer means that the photographer is absent from the process. Not only that, but it also offers a suggestion that maybe nobody *was*

Australia's Wild Places by Roger McDonald (National Library of Australia, 2009)
Cover image: Peter Dombrovskis (1945–1996)
Evening at Louisa Bay, South Coast, Southwest Tasmania, 1983
colour photograph;
64.2 x 51.4 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24365263
Courtesy Liz Dombrovskis



Frank Hurley (1885–1962)
*A Mighty Iceberg Ploughed
Its Way through the Pack
and Bore Down upon the
Imprisoned Ship* 1915
plastic negative; 12.0 x 16.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23998521

there—that it was an unpeopled landscape. And yet vast areas of the Kimberley qualify as wilderness while being used: it is a landscape somewhat changed since white settlement but, in comparison with southern Australia, little changed over the millennia.

Frank Hurley, though not the first, was Australia's most celebrated early landscape photographer—someone who earned the title of adventurer through the tough times he experienced in the Antarctic and elsewhere. Some of Hurley's famous pictures were composite or manipulated images and were derided as 'little short of fake', such as *A Summer Idyll*, *Midnight by the Great Ice Barrier* and *A Mighty Iceberg Ploughed Its Way through the Pack and Bore Down upon the Imprisoned Ship*, but his photographs have passed into dramatic legend. Thanks to Hurley it is hardly possible for us to imagine the great age of Antarctic exploration except through his lens. From 1914 to 1916 he travelled with Sir Ernest Shackleton, dropping from contact with the world after their ship the *Endurance* was wrecked, only to re-emerge in 1916 with

his exposed film (both still and movie) intact. Coming back to a world at war (one that the expeditioners had known nothing about), his photographs inspired Antarctic exploration in the decades following, explorations in which Hurley himself was still able to participate. (He returned to Antarctica in 1929 with the British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition that was commanded by Sir Douglas Mawson.)

Hurley was a professional photographer and an artist-photographer. But, it sometimes matters more that a camera was carried, rather than whether the photographer aspired to the higher aims of art. A lesser known photographer, but an equally famous Australian, was the Presbyterian minister, John Flynn, founder of the Australian Inland Mission and the Aerial Medical Service (1928) that eventually became the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Flynn was an enthusiastic amateur photographer whose picture taking was inseparable from his proselytising. He used landscape photography to dramatise distance, hardship and mateship virtues and



view that he shared with the landscape painter Hans Heysen. In less than 20 years, the picture had become famous—renamed *The Spirit of Endurance*—and the tree itself still stands, known as the ‘Cazneau Tree’: a tourist stop in the Flinders Ranges, South Australia. As a symbol of lonely survival it became crowded by curiosity as early as 1952 when bus tours made the site a destination point (as Cazneau noted in a letter to Heysen)—

LEFT
John Flynn (1880–1951)
*Central Australian Desert
Scene with Trees* between 1937
and 1942
colour lantern slide
8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24652806

BELOW
Harold Cazneau (1878–1953)
Spirit of Endurance 1937
b&w photograph; 36.9 x 42.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an2384497
Courtesy the Cazneau family

so rouse sympathy and donations for his cause, which was the establishment of nursing hostels on the pastoral frontier. Pushing back the edge of wilderness with the benefits of civilisation was the mode of the day.

Photographs change meaning profoundly over time and Flynn’s, which are little known, convey the same melancholy, loneliness and grandeur that he exploited in them but now we see these as wilderness virtues rather than as frontier obstacles to be overcome.

Whatever the feelings of the photographer might have been—no matter how hard the photographer has tried to encompass a feeling—chances are that, after studying a particular photograph, someone will go to the place depicted (or do something about it in some way, such as legislate or lobby) and make some sort of claim of possession on the basis of what the photograph shows. The photograph itself can be elected as the meaning of the place shown, as happened with Olegas Truchanas’ photographs of south-west Tasmania and, in particular, his famous photographs of ‘mega-ripples’ on Lake Pedder (flooded for hydro-electric power in 1972, the year of Truchanas’ death by drowning in the Gordon River).

When Harold Cazneau photographed *A Giant Gum in the Flinders* in 1937, his motives were aesthetic and artistic, a kind of proud but personal Australian artistic point of

threatened by the very inspiration that singled it out.

If we want to take the trouble (and sometimes it would be a great deal of trouble) we can go back and match riverbends, rock formations and trees. Some wilderness pictures were taken at famous beauty spots and belong to the cultural memory of many Australians. Others surge with familiar feeling and we know these places even when we have never before seen the particular frame, taken at a particular time. Being true to the light, vegetation and landforms of known places, they match the feeling of those places without being pictures of them exactly. When mist



comes down between the trunks of tall, bark-peeled gum trees, the sense of the cold, still dampness on a long south-eastern mountain slope is hard to shake off. But a closer look at Jeff Cutting's *Dense Alpine Ash and Mountain Gum Forest* reveals that the mist is bushfire smoke and the leaves on the trees are hanging down in the intense heat, ready to combust.

Resource development, conveyed through landscape photography, remains a dominant theme of Australian national life. Mourning the destruction that has often come with that, should we curse the photograph as a means of seduction, and ask: is wilderness photography—as a record of precious places—really any sort of influence against the destruction of wilderness and the hunger for material possession? Indeed, it might be argued that beauty holds no safety for nature, with wonder and amazement merely preceding the decision to exploit on the basis that there will always be plenty more left.

Where untouched places have been lost—degraded, built over, dug up, flooded, mined, disastrously burnt, overgrazed or cut down, with soil poisoned, scalded, blown away—the photograph's argument is strong. Images of what was remind us of what wilderness is:

no longer something that merely happens on earth, because there is no possible resistance to it as a place apart, but somewhere infinitely more vulnerable, a place apart that only just possibly might yet be allowed to be itself.

The first national parks and wilderness areas in Australia came about from campaigns headed by people who knew the bush as bushwalkers and campers or through working as foresters and timber-getters. Pioneering generations saw wilderness as a place to be conquered and possessed right down to a surveyed land title in the hand and a settler's hut by the creek, a road to town, a railway passing through, an axe and a crosscut saw for heading up into the hills to do some ringbarking and felling. Many wilderness places were left alone only because they were inaccessible, or had nothing exploitable in them. In some farming areas, what was claimed has been claimed back by the land itself and given over to become something like wilderness again. A forest of similarly aged trees is a sign of an area formerly cleared: all the trees are roughly the same size, as they are in Olive Cotton's *The Way through the Trees*.

Jeff Cutting (b.1945)
*Dense Alpine Ash and
Mountain Gum Forest on the
Upper Slopes of Bendora Hill,
into Which the Head of the
Bendora Fire Was Burning on
11th January 2003*
colour photograph
20.5 x 30.8 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3524034
Courtesy Jeff Cutting





LEFT
 Olive Cotton (1911–2003)
The Way through the Trees
 1938
 gelatin silver photograph
 28.4 x 31.6 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-an12819173
 Courtesy Josef Lebovic Gallery

BELOW
 Francis Reiss (b.1927)
*View of the Tanami Desert, in
 the Area Known as the Pound,
 Balgo Hills, 2003*
 colour digital photograph
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-vn3294966
 Courtesy Francis Reiss

Many landscape photographs have ghostly traces of people's lives in them.

In arguments for the preservation of wilderness, an initial reaction of awe—this must *not* be lost—has in more recent decades gathered such powerful advocacy from science and political organisations that the aesthetic and spiritual response can seem a much smaller voice in the wilderness equation.

But while a photograph cannot convey all the possible qualities a wild place can have, there are feelings that come with looking, comparing and returning to look again at landscape photographs that perhaps could be inspired in no other way, unless from going out wearing a strong pair of walking boots and sleeping under the stars.



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ROGER MCDONALD is the author of many books, including award-winning novels *Mr Darwin's Shooter* and *The Ballad of Desmond Kale*. This article is an abridged version of his introduction to *Australia's Wild Places*, published by the National Library of Australia in 2009