

Hurley's Australia



Myth, Dream, Reality

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Selected and introduced
by John Thompson

National Library of Australia
Canberra 1999

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Front cover: Sydney Harbour Bridge, Sydney, New South Wales

Back cover: Frank Hurley (lying on the ground), Blue Gum Forest, Blue Mountains, New South Wales, c.1950s. Courtesy John Ferguson

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JOHN THOMPSON

John Thompson grew up in Australia in the 1950s. He is a graduate in history from Monash University and the Australian National University where he is now working on a study of the public career of historian Geoffrey Serle. From 1979 until 1999 he was employed at the National Library of Australia. He was Director of Australian Collections and Services from 1987–92. His other publications are *The People's Treasures: Collections in the National Library of Australia* (1997), *Faces of Mandurama* (1998), *Of Love and Friendship* (1998) and *The Oxford Book of Australian Letters* (with Brenda Niall, 1998). At present, he is preparing an anthology of writings selected from Australian journals and diaries for Oxford University Press.

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The suggestion for this book came from Dr Paul Hetherington, Director of Publications in the National Library of Australia. I had the pleasure of working with Paul Hetherington over several years and owe him a great deal; he was one of a number of colleagues who encouraged me to write more extensively and who, in so doing, led me to reflect more deeply about the National Library's great collections of Australian archival and documentary materials.

The initial selection of photographs from the National Library's large Hurley archive was made with the assistance of Tony Twining and Anne Day. Later choices were made with the help of Jodie Ward and Maria Nugent. Staff in the National Library's Photographic Section prepared Hurley's prints and glass-plate negatives for publication.

Frank Hurley's daughter Mrs Toni Mooy-Hurley took a friendly and active interest in the preparation of the book and willingly assisted with answers to questions. She also lent a number of photographs of her father from her personal collection and some of these accompany the introduction. The Sydney publisher John Ferguson was also very helpful, providing recollections of Hurley at work during the 1950s and offering his shrewd and well-informed assessment of Hurley's prolific publishing and photographic career in the later years of his life. John Ferguson continues the tradition of friendship which has existed for many years between members of his family and the National Library of Australia.

The book owes much to Maria Nugent who edited a sometimes wayward text and who spent considerable time preparing captions for the photographs. With a critical eye but a light touch, she imposed order and some geographical specificity to Hurley's sometimes vague or misleading attributions. In its finished form, the book is a better one both for her skills and for her historical appreciation of the photographs created by Frank Hurley. Jodie Ward designed the book and with her own training as a photographer responded enthusiastically to the work of the old master.

FOREWORD

This book contains a selection of Frank Hurley's late period Australian photography drawn from the extensive archive of his work held by the National Library of Australia. Frank Hurley's photographic career is divided into a number of distinct phases. Undoubtedly his best and deservedly his most famous work was executed in the first precocious years when the young adventurer accompanied Douglas Mawson to the Antarctic. Later, during the years of the First World War in France and Palestine, Hurley built on the formidable reputation he had established in the Antarctic, creating in the process some remarkable images of men at war, photographs which for many define the horrors which Australians faced in that mortal conflict. In the following two decades, Hurley built on his prewar photographic successes while also serving as a skilled cinematographer. In the Second World War he again served abroad, documenting the engagement of Australian troops in the Middle East campaigns.

In the years following his return to Australia after the war and until his death in January 1962, Hurley embarked on the last major phase of his career. Financially hard-pressed after several years away from home, Hurley's motivation initially was economically driven based on the immediate need to rebuild his financial base. His postwar photographic assignments, both those he initiated himself and those he undertook on commission, were carried out in Australia and became the means by which he expressed his own celebratory, simple and heart-felt patriotism. At the same time, Hurley shrewdly catered to the needs of an Australian audience keen to see in the images he created an affirmation of the country's postwar prosperity.

In selecting the photographs for this book, an effort has been made to provide an understanding of Hurley's prevailing themes as well as his geographic spread. Although he lived in Sydney and maintained for the whole of his adult life an intense love affair with the city, his diaries record his many journeys across the State and to various parts of Australia. In the large output of his published books, calendars and promotional material which appeared from the mid-1940s until the time of his death, Hurley's purpose was to document the whole country—its cities and their suburbs, the pastoral industry, industrial development, the bush and the remote outback, the pain and suffering of natural disasters, the patterns and routines of work, the Australian preoccupation with sport and leisure and a sense, in various ways, of the achievement of British civilisation in what had once been a despised penal outpost.

The precise dating and identification of some photographs have proved to be difficult. Driven as he was by commercial imperatives, Hurley promiscuously used favourite images again and again relying on their generic appeal rather than their geographic or temporal accuracy. In this period, Hurley rarely gave fixed titles to his photographs, relying perhaps on the obvious recognisability of many of his subjects. Dates too are uncertain, although some idea of these is possible from Hurley's principal publications, particularly his highly popular *Camera Studies* series. However, since captions given to the same photograph could vary from publication to publication, it seemed sensible in this selection to use a Hurley title only where this appears to be reasonably certain. These Hurley titles have been indicated in the book with quotation marks, for example, 'Symphony in Steel'. Otherwise, it seemed best to construct simple descriptive titles in the interests of achieving some overall consistency. In captioning the images, we have emphasised geographical specificity. However there are a few cases in which it has been impossible to identify the location of the image. These photographs appear with a simple descriptive title in square brackets, for example, [Silos].

The immediate purpose of the book is to look again at the career of one of Australia's most famous and most prolific photographers, and through the work he did in a specific period of his life to consider some of the issues involved in the construction of image and identity in the task of depicting what might broadly be called the nation. A secondary, but no less vital purpose, is to reinforce in the Australian community an appreciation of the larger cultural role and purpose of the National Library of Australia. One of the Library's central responsibilities is the building and preservation of a collection that documents Australia and the Australian people. Through its active publishing program, the Library works to ensure that Australians may have access to the collections which ultimately form part of the national heritage.

John Thompson, Canberra, 1999

By any measure, Frank Hurley—adventurer, photographer and filmmaker—was an extraordinary Australian. Precocious, eager, hugely energetic with an impressive stamina and vigour, Hurley single-mindedly pushed himself to the limits to carve out a legendary career marked by some remarkable opportunities and some equally remarkable achievements.

Hurley has a secure place in the history of Australian photography. His reputation as a still photographer rests with certainty on his pioneering work as a young man with Mawson in Antarctica and later along the Western Front in the battlefields of France and the Middle East in the First World War. The stuff of his achievement and the flavour of his career are summed up by the writer Lennard Bickel from a vantage point in 1914 just before Hurley embarked on his third Antarctic adventure, this time with the British explorer Ernest Shackleton:

Introducing Frank Hurley



On Bowsprit of Discovery, c. 1929–31
Courtesy Ian Mox-Hurley

Still to come from his lens were other immortal pictures that would flow into history—of exploration and of war; still to come were his photographic gems of trench warfare in Flanders, of Hellfire Corner on the Menin Road, Ypres, and the sad woods of multi-death in France; the Light Horse with Allenby in Palestine, the bombing of Jericho, the first air attacks on Turkish lines, endless views of soldiers moving into battle—often taken ahead of advancing troops. And, in between wars, the years of hustle and dash, of feature films, a dalliance with pioneer aviation and a near-fatal crash, adventures in remote places, and films for showing in Britain and America. Then war again; with tank attacks in the dust of the Western Desert, scenes in beleaguered Tobruk, Bardia, and final victory in the desert, from Alamein to Benghazi.¹

Already behind Hurley were his photographs and first astonishing effort at cinematography executed in cruel conditions in Antarctica while still in his twenties during his membership of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911–13 led by Douglas Mawson. In the light of the later adventures with Shackleton when Hurley, in some of his most famous photographs, recorded the crushing of the *Endurance* as pack-ice remorselessly closed in, the time with Mawson—for all of its abundant drama and privation—has the quality of a dress rehearsal.

Hurley liked to imagine that photography was his destiny. As a young man he was introduced to the simple Kodak box camera by a workmate and was soon mesmerised by the wonders of photography. Flushed with enthusiasm and driven by excitement, Hurley quickly sought to acquire the knowledge he needed to achieve mastery of his chosen medium. Within the first year of his initiation, Hurley read all he could about, and absorbed an understanding of, the principles of light values and time exposures, the art of picture composition, the processes by which images could be fixed into permanent form, and all the tricks of developing, fixing and shading to achieve particular effects.² Recalling his early obsession with photography in his 1925 publication *Argonauts of the South*, Hurley wrote:

From the time I first gazed wonderingly at the miracle of chemical reaction on the latent image during the process of development, I knew I had found my real work, and a key, could I but become its master, that would perhaps unlock the portals of the undiscovered World.¹

Frank Hurley was born into the working-class suburb of Glebe in Sydney on 15 October 1885, the second son of Edward Harrison Hurley, a Lancashire-born printer and trade union official, and Margaret Agnes Bouffier, the daughter of a family of vintners from the French province of Alsace Lorraine.⁴ His given names of James Francis were forsaken early for the shorter form of Frank by which he was known throughout his life. Hurley's formal education was short-lived. At the age of 13, with a modest mastery of reading and writing, the boy abandoned the hated regimentation of his school and the safe environment of his family home and struck out on his own for the New South Wales coal town of Lithgow where he found employment in the steel mill. Having broken this news in a letter to his father, to his surprise the young Hurley was reassured that in his act of independence and courage might be the key to his future success. His father's advice was brief but to the point: 'If you can't find a way—then make one.' This dictum was invoked time after time, relentlessly, stubbornly and tenaciously until, at the age of 77, after a day spent working, Hurley's near-indomitable spirit succumbed. In January 1962, the old man sat silent for a day and a night, a blanket around his shoulders, refusing to be moved to bed or to hospital, until his heartbeat flickered and faded.⁵

In a perceptive essay on Frank Hurley, the historian Julian Thomas characterised him as a 'showman'.⁶ This term was originally applied to Hurley by one of his own contemporaries and friends, the journalist and filmmaker Maslyn Williams, who observed that: 'Cappy was wholly a showman who worked hard at being Frank Hurley, explorer, camera man, and intrepid adventurer, to whom the whole world was a challenge.'⁷

At the time of the photographs represented in this book, Hurley in his sixties—an age when many men have thoughts of retirement—was in the final years of his career. Although his greatest successes were behind him, Hurley had the same restless urge to wander and to work. His prime years had included his several visits to Antarctica, his assignments in Papua New Guinea, Europe and the Middle East, and his eight years in the 1930s working for the Australian film studio Cinesound when he emerged as probably the most powerful force to shape Australian documentary filmmaking in the period before the Second World War.⁸ From his precocious start as a photographer when he worked with Henry Cave in a thriving Sydney postcard business, Hurley made his reputation in the creation of dramatic and unusual pictures. In those formative years, he thought nothing of standing in front of locomotives roaring out of



Outside Cinesound Film Studio, Sydney, New South Wales, c.1930s



Pitt Street, Sydney, New South Wales

tunnels, hanging from sleepers on a bridge crossing to capture an unusual head-on shot of a massive engine bearing down, or flirting with death by drowning to obtain stark pictures of waves crashing against cliffs.⁹ And as he commenced, so he continued until the end of his life, always bringing an intense physicality to the making of his pictures.

In the final year of his life on a journey across the Nullarbor, Hurley cheated death as he had done so many times before. This time it was through the sheer triumph of will over a weakening body. Lennard Bickel has given us the story of this incident. Having been told of a wonderland of caves beneath the desert, Hurley determined to see for himself this magical world known to Aboriginal people as a precious source of water. In an entry in his diary, he noted: 'We descended into a huge cavern, walls smoothed by a stream which in ages gone by had cut away the limestone and left a basin some 100 feet below ... a vast sheet of transparent jade.' Deep below the ground, beside that luminous sheet of water, Hurley suffered what seems to have been a heart attack, a *memento mori*. His climb back up the rope to the surface was made slowly and painfully but he persisted and, being Frank Hurley, put the incident behind him.¹⁰

The photographic career of Frank Hurley spans more than 60 years and is as rich in adventure as it is in achievement. As a young man Hurley made a formidable reputation through the body of work created in the Antarctic, first with Mawson and then, even more spectacularly, with Shackleton. Immediately afterwards, his coverage of the engagements in battles of Australians in France and in the Middle East added lustre to his reputation. The images created in these years have found their place among the enduring achievements of Australian photography.

In the years between the two world wars, Hurley consolidated his early fame through his central role in the making of Australian documentary films. Many of the films he made were celebratory accounts of Australian achievement such as *Symphony in Steel*, his classic and heroic account of the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Commissioned by the Commonwealth Government, he made a documentary entitled *A Nation Is Built* to celebrate Australia's 1938 sesquicentenary. In the making of *A Nation Is Built* he 'roamed the continent from the Snowy Mountains to the raging deserts, from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean'.¹¹ Though well paid for his services, Hurley embarked on this task as a labour of love and with patriotic fervour. He represented Australia as a privileged place, open, spacious, rich in resources and with a manifest destiny to achieve greatness—'the most valuable acquisition Great Britain ever made'.¹² In many ways, the ideas about Australia which he explored in this film were to inform the relentless and lucrative photographic career which he pursued from 1946 until his death in 1962.

Between his 1930s documentary filmmaking and the last phase of his career, Hurley briefly returned to an earlier role as war photographer. Although during this short interstice he produced some fine photographs, the period seems to have marked the beginning of his professional eclipse. With the declaration of war in 1939, Hurley at the age of 56 confidently expected that he would be called on to play a key role in documenting the engagement in battles of Australian forces. Initially, he was to be disappointed and to experience for the first time the fading of his star as younger men such as Damien Parer and George Silk were encouraged ahead of him. Eventually, late in 1940, Hurley was sent to the Middle East as head of the Department of Information's Cinematographic and Photographic Unit. His brief was to make films for screening in Britain, Canada, the United States, New Zealand and Australia. Yet, although this prized commission put him again in the thick of the action, it also brought him into conflict with the brilliant younger generation of photographers and filmmakers who considered Hurley old-fashioned and even eccentric. The pace of modern war and its vast geographic scope combined with Hurley's continued reliance on heavy and cumbersome equipment counted against him. The younger men working with hand-held cameras were able to record quickly and at close range all they witnessed. As a result, they often produced pictures of greater emotional impact which perhaps more truly reflected the ordinary soldier's life in the Western Desert. While the seasoned Hurley notched up some successes, his work from the Second World War cannot be compared to the emotionally powerful work he had previously executed on the frontline, especially in France in the war of 1914–18.¹³

Returning to Australia in 1946, Frank Hurley, like so many of his countrymen demobilised after the war, was faced with building a new career. Retirement, even if the idea had entered his head, was not a practical option. After years of high earning and continual wandering, Hurley was faced with a drastic downturn in his domestic fortunes and with the urgent imperative to earn a living. The large house in the affluent Sydney suburb of Point Piper which had been his home in the interwar years had been sold during his absence by his wife Antoinette who, with their children grown-up and living away from home, had found the house too large. Home was now a semidetached cottage in the southern beachside suburb of Maroubra. Antoinette's management of the household finances had been disastrous, exacerbated by the rising cost of living during the war. Debt had mounted. Hurley, now a grandfather of three, was forced to contemplate rebuilding his economic base. For inspiration, he was to turn his attention to his own country. In this last phase of his life he was to create a large body of work which reflected his own obsessive celebration of the land, the people and the abundant opportunity of Australia—elements that were widely promoted by politicians and bureaucrats of the day as the essential underpinnings of Australia's era of postwar reconstruction.¹⁴

In most accounts of Hurley's work, his late Australian photography is given only brief attention, a kind of footnote to the singular and dramatic achievements of the younger man. In his entry on Hurley in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, the film historian Andrew Pike



Preparing for Tour of Queensland, c.1950s
 Courtesy of the National Library of Australia

notes matter-of-factly that after Hurley's postwar return to Australia, he concentrated on still photography and published several books of photographs of Australian landscapes and city portraits.¹⁵ Julian Thomas has written of the promotional and celebratory dimension of Hurley's postwar work—the pictorial showcasing of 'the best country in the world'. Hurley's emphasis was on Australia's natural beauty and its industrial and agricultural productivity. Implicit in Thomas' account is the criticism that Hurley worked within a limited aesthetic and to a formula: 'wheat fields, waterfalls and beaches

looked good in bright sunshine, and a picturesque sky completed them'.¹⁶



Peak Downs, Queensland

Thomas' mention of a picturesque sky as the hallmark of a Hurley photograph is a reference to his longstanding practice of embellishing or manipulating an image to achieve a particular effect or to heighten its drama. Hurley was well known for his construction of composite images, and for the addition of a dramatic sky to enhance the mood of a picture. This practice, used at least since the First World War, had aroused controversy and criticism among those who thought the veracity of the photographic record was compromised. Hurley's defence was an artistic one: if the finished result gave the viewer a better understanding of the scene, or if it enhanced the realism or beauty of the photograph, then such manipulation was appropriate.¹⁷ John Ferguson, son of George Ferguson of Angus & Robertson, one of Hurley's Australian publishers, remembered that years later when Hurley was discussing the merits of some of the well-known photographs taken in the Blue Mountains, he freely admitted to adding 'a Palestine sky'.

A fuller appreciation of Hurley's later work is provided by Lennard Bickel in his affectionate and sympathetic biography *In Search of Frank Hurley*. Bickel gives a sentimental picture of the ageing photographer moving through the continent

living out his role of the pictorial expression of his country with a parade of Australia's dazzling wildflowers, blue-lit mountains reflected in gilded streams, landscapes colourful and immense, shots of cities throbbing with vitality, lovely remote beaches, and mobs of idle cattle and sheep in placid array under typical Hurley skies.¹⁸

Bickel fails however to provide a critical context to the work, interpreting it merely as a reworking of the patriotic imperatives of Hurley's late 1930s film *A Nation Is Built*. Gael Newton in *Shades of Light*, her authoritative survey of Australian photography, apparently saw no cause to mention Hurley in her discussion of the more highly textured and probing work done in the same period by a younger generation of photographers such as Laurence Le Guay, Max Dupain

and David Moore. Against their modernism and clean, pared-back elegance, their essays in the surreal and their willingness to represent life in inner-city working-class homes, Hurley's photographs belonged both technically and conceptually to another era.¹⁹

The Australian Dream

Hurley's photographs and the publication of his various *Camera Studies of Australia*, from the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s until his death in 1962, must be seen predominantly as a product and reflection of prevailing social and cultural attitudes. While old-fashioned and lacking the satiric element that marked the work of some of the younger photographers during the same period, it nevertheless captures much of what is now understood as the essence of Australian life in the 1950s—its sanitised quality, its nascent industrialism, its social stability and conformity, its dullness and complacency and its romanticisation of the bush and vast landscape combined paradoxically with a willingness to exploit the natural environment for its timber and minerals. For those Australians who grew to their maturity as the so-called baby boom generation in the benevolent embrace of the unbroken succession of Liberal–Country Party coalition governments, Hurley's photographs concentrate with intense clarity some of the defining characteristics and values of their period.



A Karri Forest, Western Australia

In his radio presentations for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's 1998 Boyer lecture series, the Australian poet and novelist David Malouf remembered the 1950s as a watershed in the life of modern Australia. At the same time however he suggested that it was a disputed one, where elements of continuity and certainty existed uneasily against a growing sense of doubt and threat. Malouf evoked the 1950s as the last time in Australian history

when old-fashioned frugality and a sense of duty mattered to people; when you could still leave the front door open while you slipped down to the shops; when it was still shameful to be divorced; when gentlemen still gave up their seats to ladies on the tram; when backyards in the cities still had a vegetable patch and a wire-netting enclosure for chooks, that kept city folk in touch with country matters and made city kids aware of where eggs came from.²⁰

It was an era when most Australians shared the same culture, when there was no significant divide between high and low culture, or between youth culture and the rest. And it was a time when families had their own seats at the Saturday night pictures and when races dominated the radio. Malouf could have added that it was an era of full or near-full employment, of social regimentation and conformity, of a prevailing dullness of dress and when the suburb rather than the city was the focus of family life.

Against the manifest virtues and the certainties of the age, the young Malouf discerned in the adult world around him an

anxiety at the centre of people's lives. A sense of resentment ... and contempt for anything 'different'—large gestures, extravagant emotions, a suspicion of everything 'out there' that might challenge [the belief of Australians] that the world we had here, however ingrown and pinched it might seem to outsiders, was the biggest, the fairest, the sunniest, the healthiest, the best fed.²¹



Bondi Beach, Sydney, New South Wales

The baby boomer Peter Conrad looked back recently on 'the terrified conformity of the 1950s' and observed that his parents in Tasmania, having survived the war and the economic stress that had preceded it, were grateful for the chance of happiness and prosperity which had arrived at last and which was 'symbolized by a suburban house and the expectation of life-long employment'.²²

In his distillation of Australia in the 1950s, Malouf suggested that fear was another element of the prevailing order—fear of communism, of the infection of Europe which had been appallingly revealed by the recent war, of the sick disorder and obscenity of modernism, and especially of Modern Art, and of North American culture and commercialism. It was a world in which Malouf, as a young man, came to sense that the country was 'forever crouched in an attitude of aggrieved and aggressive self-defence. Closed in on itself. A sullen backwater and sullenly proud of the fact'.²³

Frank Hurley's imperative as he set about developing his postwar career was twofold. A practical necessity was to make money to repair his difficult financial situation. But perhaps of greater importance was his desire to project his own affectionate response to Australia. In approaching his task, Hurley's fundamental conservatism emerged, finding a natural response in the larger conservatism inherent in the Australian people. Hurley brought to his late work a sense of social mission which was in keeping with the tenor of the times. His output during these years was prolific; his physical effort in travelling throughout the country was as energetic and determined as ever. In the last decade of his life, Hurley is said to have covered a quarter of a million miles in journey after journey, back and forth across the country.

The substantial income that Hurley gained from his late work suggests that the vision of Australia he presented appealed to a wide audience. He, indeed, had something to say to Australians. Bickel has noted the publication of ‘book after book, illustrated with [Hurley’s] superb pictures, the texts written patiently in long-hand on a dining table at night; calendars by the thousands, pamphlets, articles, exhibitions, display prints ... on and on’.²⁴ The Sydney publisher John Ferguson, in conversation with me, recalled recently the importance that his father George Ferguson at Angus & Robertson gave to keeping Hurley’s work in print. Probably the definitive Hurley title during these years was *Australia: A Camera Study* first published in 1955. It sold consistently well in reprint after reprint, the last one produced posthumously in 1966. Similarly from the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s Hurley published camera studies of Queensland (1950), Western Australia (1953), Tasmania (1953) and Victoria (1956) as well as for Sydney (1948) and the Blue Mountains and Jenolan Caves (1952).²⁵

John Ferguson remembers the wide appeal of the Hurley books and related products. Their success was due in part to Hurley having cornered a market—‘there were no competitors’. The photographs caught ‘Australia for Australians’. At the same time, they were the means by which successive waves of postwar immigrants were able to give an impression of their adopted country to family members left behind in Europe. Hurley’s inherent pride in his country found a response in his audience. Australians, riding the boom of a new prosperity founded on wool, wheat and other resources, responded enthusiastically to images that spoke of national and individual wellbeing and success. In Ferguson’s opinion, a crucial element of Hurley’s appeal was that his books were ‘tasteful’. They projected a wholesomeness which reinforced in their local audience that Australia was a safe and good place to live and in which to raise a family. These memories of Hurley’s publications sit well with David Malouf’s considered dissection of the attitudes and values of 1950s Australia.

My own memories of school days in the 1950s recall the emphasis given in the curriculum to the country’s natural resources and the understanding that flowed from this that Australia was a blessed place. Geography and Social Studies lessons required a plastic template map of Australia so that within the secure frame of the country’s coastline might be shaded details of the distribution of resources such as wool, wheat and minerals of various kinds. Every child knew where iron ore was produced and the names of the ships that carried the raw materials for processing. Such names as *Iron Knob* and *Iron Monarch* conveyed strength, certainty and their own kind of majesty. As I have looked at Hurley’s photographs of the 1950s in preparing this book, how familiar they seem and how strongly they reinforce in me a sense of time and place that is as perfect in its delineation as it is remote and distant from the Australia we live in today.



Mount Isa, Queensland

A number of writers and commentators have noted that there are two very different versions of life in 1950s Australia—the disputed area mentioned by David Malouf. The first of these versions defines the 1950s as a period when nothing happened: no war; no economic recession; long, hot summers; recurring Davis Cup victories; and the new Holden in the driveway of the suburban home. Countryside was scenery to be driven through on Sunday afternoons. It was also a source of national wealth. There was not yet an environment to protect. The standard of living was high; unemployment low. Australian families were united and harmonious, bound together by economic good fortune. Crime, protest, conflict and discontent were the lot of other, less fortunate countries.



Carnarvon Ranges, Queensland

The second version of the 1950s also defines the period as one in which nothing happened. In this version, however, Australia was dull, conformist, bland, inward-looking, provincial and conservative. The tyranny of the quarter-acre block left the old alienated, the young bored, the women isolated and the men in the pub. Those Australians with cultural aspirations had to leave Australia for 'overseas', which really meant London.³⁶

It is within this contested landscape of 1950s Australia—its pros and cons—that Frank Hurley's photographs sit. Their value today is as record—an accumulation of competent, technically assured images by a veteran photographer. But it is for their documentary value that they can now be read and appraised. Their strength lies in the portrait they draw of one of the key decades of Australian life. Hurley defined his own mission, this man who had once travelled the world, to give Australians the means for understanding and appreciating their own country. He did so in terms of the cultural limitations and social prejudices of the day. Hurley's vision was clear, uncomplicated and based firmly in reality. It was not a vision that encompassed plurality, diversity or

complexity. The social order was simple; the message didactic. Hurley's purpose and his overall interpretation was largely celebratory. He presented a vision of wide open spaces, successful rural industries, the happy assimilation of migrant families, industrial development, modern spacious cities and a well-ordered but highly conformist society.

A curious absence in the many photographs that Hurley published during the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s are portrayals of Aboriginal Australians. Hurley himself had previously pursued an interest in Aboriginal people and aspects of their traditional culture, and his archive of photographs contains some sympathetic studies, probably from an earlier period. But by the values of

the later age, the numerous Hurley publications of the 1950s seem to have ignored indigenous Australians, or was it only absentmindedness? The Aboriginal presence in Hurley's photographs of this period appears to be little more than incidental.²⁷

In the final year of his life, Hurley completed a round Australia tour which took him a distance of more than 11 000 miles north from Sydney to Queensland, to the Northern Territory and Western Australia and back through South Australia and Victoria and its high country. As always, he kept a diary, recording his impressions of the journey. The diary gives insight into the flavour of the man and his paradoxical qualities—his heroism and his sentimentality; his machismo and his sensitivity to the play of light and shadow; and his wonder at the awe of nature and his acknowledgment that his own efforts owed something to a beneficent deity:

the gem was undoubtedly Feathertop with Mt Bogong in the far away & all the lovely purple & deep blue shadows leading up to it like a royal mantle. Here is the grandest Alpine scene in Australia & my camera did its best to record the grand scene. It was such a day when God was in His heaven for the skies were of seraphim beauty floating like outspread white wings across the blue dome of the sky & dappling Nature's crystalline beauty which spread out around us. A glorious day & we plodded back tired with heavy cameras but feeling our effort had been magnanimously repaid.²⁸



Grampians, Victoria

The Photographs

Frank Hurley's Australian photographs taken from the 1940s to the beginning of the 1960s embody some essential truths about the country he knew and loved. Hurley's own experience in the company of men in the Antarctic and later at the frontline in the two world wars had given him a particular and practical understanding of the traditions of Australian mateship. He knew at first hand the mutual dependence that exists between people bonded together in times of privation and stress. His Antarctic experience with Mawson's team in the years 1911–13 had provided an important lesson in the contribution that individuals can make to group survival in times of crisis. This was reinforced for him many times over in the years that followed—at the Western Front and in Palestine in the First World War and at Tobruk as the Rats fought Rommel's army in the desert in 1942.



[Harvest Time]

Another universal theme, and one particularly close to Hurley's own experience, is the salute given to Australia's war dead in photographs of the Cenotaph in Martin Place, Sydney, and of the National War Memorial in Anzac Square, Brisbane. While both are conventional studies, they are images with an inherent dignity and emotional power. Particularly moving is that of the Brisbane monument lit so as to throw into high relief the names of places associated with Australian heroism and sacrifice. Images of this kind are commonplace in the long tradition of the filial dues that Australians pay to their fallen, but in the chiaroscuro shading which Hurley gives to the prints, he achieves a rich sonority which speaks beyond the caught moment and suggests very well that this tribute is peculiarly his own.

While much of Hurley's work in this period was commercial and promotional, it also served a didactic and political purpose. At a time when European immigration to Australia was actively encouraged, Hurley's camera was pressed into service to reinforce the idea that the country was indeed a land of opportunity. For his local audience and for people overseas, the

photographs offered a means to celebrate and reinforce the idea of Australia as uniquely privileged—a place of spectacular beauty and of abundant opportunity. Implicit in many of his photographs was a comparison with the old world, stained and corrupted by war and tainted by the ideologies of political extremism.

In Hurley's oeuvre, Australian cities were depicted with a pristine neatness. They apparently lacked either a dark side or even the cosmopolitan buzz of café society that was to inspire a new generation of photographers. In executing his work, Hurley was inevitably drawn into the formulaic representation of 'typical' Australian scenes. He was especially attracted to spectacular mountain scenery such as that of the Blue Mountains west of Sydney or the Macdonnell Ranges in the Northern Territory. He responded with the same enthusiasm to Sydney's harbour and beaches, depicting them as the quintessential expression of the good life in Australia.

As with so many other Australian photographers before and since, the Sydney Harbour Bridge, emblematic and iconic, became a favourite subject. In Hurley's case, though, his inspiration was as much based on his intimate familiarity with the bridge as it was a response to a subject which had now become the conventional means of demonstrating that Australia was a modern and dynamic country. In the making of the film *Symphony in Steel* in the early 1930s, Hurley was said to have crawled over every girder of the mighty construction which still stands as one of the most immediately recognisable visual images of Australia.²⁹

In the 1950s, Australians took particular pride in their suburbs as a measure of postwar success and prosperity. Certainly the suburban allotment and its neat home were seen as the embodiment of the Australian dream, the ideal which was

Circular Quay, Sydney, New South Wales





Wentworth Falls, Blue Mountains, New South Wales

the country's reward to itself after the privations and uncertainties of the years of economic depression and then of war. Hurley joined readily in the popular admiration of the postwar expansion of the suburbs and his photographs of the period did much to reinforce the idea that suburban expansion was a key indicator of material progress. In Sydney, he took to the air as if to show more clearly that the sheer spread of the modern suburb affirmed the truth of the country's progress and its material success. His *Sydney from the Sky: A Camera Study* was published by Angus & Robertson in 1952. Aerial views of Australian cities and later of the outback became a consistent feature of his photographic practice.

Hurley's enthusiasm for aerial photography had its origins in the first flight he took over Jerusalem and the Biblical lands of the Middle East towards the end of the First World War with the Australian aviation pioneer Ross Smith. The adventurous Hurley had revelled in the sheer exhilaration of flight itself while his artistic eye responded to the patchwork he saw spread out beneath him, 'numerous villages ... scattered like tiny patches of honeycomb' with roads, streams and wadies radiating in

all directions like ribbons and arteries with networks of veins.³⁰ Years later, at home in Australia, the same artistic eye embraced the dense encrustation of houses and flats disappearing into white distance over the Sydney headlands and foreshores, the rectangular patterns of plains under agricultural cultivation and the slow rolling break of the surf viewed from the air over Bondi Beach.

Other favourite Hurley subjects were drawn from Australia's primary and secondary industries which provided the underpinning of the country's postwar prosperity. Again, in these last years of his life, the formula shot proved the most accessible. Not for him the elegant near-abstract essays of the intricate workings of industrial machinery seen in the work of Wolfgang Sievers, but rather the macho bulk of heavy-duty equipment or the toughness of miners at work. Certain themes and images recur. As Julian Thomas has observed, scenes of ambling flocks of sheep were repeated in Hurley's photography—his projection of an idealised and romantic view of the country as well as an obvious expression of the economic importance during this period of the wool industry. The cliché which these scenes were to become should not obscure the fact that Australians were happy to be reminded that the country's fortunes rode on the sheep's back and that while the majority of the population lived in the suburbs, the myth survived that Australians were a rural people.

Hurley's work of the 1950s presents us with a paradox. On the one hand, there is his depiction of the majesty and grandeur of the landscape; on the other, and seemingly without a sense of contradiction, the depiction of that same landscape

as a resource to be plundered for its riches. But there is a sense in which this contradiction was itself a product of the era that unquestioningly put its faith in the commercial exploitation of the country's abundant natural resources. This was a period when national development assumed the importance of holy writ. Hurley was merely the conduit, though a willing one, for the expression of something which seemed to many to be unremarkable. The emergence of a popular conservation movement during the 1960s and 1970s was to change this way of thinking.

In his photographic celebration of Australian beach culture, Hurley's message was democratic and egalitarian, ingrained in him as an article of faith, but also a part of his didactic mission to present Australia as a country where 'class and creed combine to get the best out of life under cloudless blue skies'.³¹ In the military precision of the surf-lifesaving carnival, he was happy to celebrate with his fellow Australians the melding of the 'Digger tradition' into the mainstream of civilian life. And in his depiction of a crowd at leisure at the races, rather than mocking their dull uniformity of dress or regimentation, he celebrates them as the 'people of Sydney'.

Well-ordered, sunlit and conventional, Hurley's photographs consciously celebrate the realisation of the best intentions of the founding fathers while also suggesting that national success flows from good habits and hard work. In a series of photographs of some of Sydney's public institutions, its first university and its Graeco-Roman Public (now State) Library building—home to the Mitchell Library collection of Australian books, manuscripts and paintings—Hurley pays dues to the civilising influence of culture and learning and to the best of Britain's legacy to Australia. At the same time, these images reinforce a community pride in the quality of Australian life.

Independent and the 'loner' that he was, Hurley saw no need to satirise the nine-to-five mentality of his fellow Australians. Although he would have hated the confinement and limitations of such routine and repetitive work, his photographs of office workers and postal employees suggest the national virtues of honest toil and steadfastness while his photographic portrait of a surgeon at work dignifies and idealises the caring professions.

Dental Hospital, Sydney, New South Wales



Myth, Dream, Reality?

As these photographs reveal, Australians owe a certain debt to Frank Hurley for a visual record that defines and represents a key era of the country's modern age. If the photographs now seem old-fashioned, this is in part because so much has changed in the half-century since they began to appear in public circulation. It is important to recognise however that Hurley's understanding of Australia's postwar modernity was filtered through his own conservatism and his advanced years. Hugely energetic as he remained, he was in these years an old man. His pictorial representation of Australia was an uncomplicated construction of his own and his generation's view of the world. While subscribing enthusiastically to ideas of progress, modernisation and industrial development, Hurley's view of the world was in many ways out of date. His work of this period is both a mirror of its time and an artificial creation, a source of myth and dream and the representation of a particular reality which already had its own critics.

Hurley's work of the last years of his professional career looked back to a golden age which existed—if it had ever really existed in fact—as a romantic hope. For a time, this image of Australia met a popular need but with the advent of the restless decade of the 1960s, it was consigned surprisingly quickly to oblivion. Half a century later, as Australia prepares to enter the new millennium, Hurley's portrait of a vanished time and place offers the means for a backward glance. For some this will provide nostalgic comfort and perhaps some yearning for the past; for others, a question and even a little puzzlement: is this the way we were?

NOTES

¹ Lennard Bickel, *In Search of Frank Hurley*. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1980, pp. 8–9.

² Bickel, *ibid.*, p. 13.

³ Frank Hurley, *Argonauts of the South*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1925, p. 10.

⁴ See also Bickel, *op. cit.*; Frank Legg in collaboration with Toni Hurley, *Once More on My Adventure* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1966); and David Millar, *From Snowdrift to Shellfire: Captain James Francis (Frank) Hurley, 1885–1962*, (Sydney: David Ell Press, 1984).

⁵ Bickel, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–13, p. 132.

⁶ Julian Thomas, *Showman: The Photography of Frank Hurley*. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1990, p. 1. See also, Julian Thomas, 'The Showman as Hero: Frank Hurley', *Voices*, vol. 1, no. 1, Autumn 1991, pp. 23–38.

⁷ Quoted in Thomas (1990), *op. cit.*, p. 1. Hurley was known as Cappy to his friends, a diminutive of his wartime honorary title of Captain which he retained and used for years afterwards.

⁸ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 9, 1891–1939. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, p. 412.

⁹ Bickel, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ Bickel, *ibid.*, p. 131.

¹¹ Bickel, *ibid.*, p. 100.

¹² Shooting script for *A Nation Is Built* which appears in manuscript form with the working title 'The Vision of a Nation', Frank Hurley Papers, MS 883, Series 3, Item 46, Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia.

¹³ *Hurley at War: The Photograph and Diaries of Frank Hurley in Two World Wars*. Sydney: Fairfax Library in association with Daniel O'Keefe, 1986, pp. 6–7.

¹⁴ Bickel, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

¹⁵ *Australia Dictionary of Biography*, *op. cit.*, p. 412.

¹⁶ Thomas (1990), *op. cit.*, pp. 17–18. See also Millar, *op. cit.*, pp. 132–138 for a further discussion of Hurley's late period Australian photography.

- ¹⁷ Bickel, op. cit., p. 61.
- ¹⁸ Bickel, *ibid.*, p. 127–128.
- ¹⁹ Gael Newton, *Shades of Light: Photography and Australia 1839–1988*. Canberra: Australian National Gallery, 1988, pp. 115–128.
- ²⁰ David Malouf, *A Spirit of Play*. Sydney: ABC Books, 1998, pp. 80–81.
- ²¹ Bickel, op. cit., p. 127–128.
- ²² Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998, p. 6.
- ²³ Malouf, op. cit., p. 83.
- ²⁴ Bickel, op. cit., p. 128.
- ²⁵ See Millar, op. cit., p. 136: ‘Between 1952 and 1962 Angus & Robertson’s produced a total of 168 500 printings. The most successful were to be *Australia* (56 000 copies in four editions) and *Sydney* (50 000 copies in five editions).’
- ²⁶ Richard White, ‘The Shock of Affluence: The Fifties in Australia’, in Judith O’Callaghan (ed.), *The Australian Dream: Design of the Fifties*. Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing, 1993, pp. 11–12.
- ²⁷ In the camera study of Queensland published in 1950, Hurley included a chapter on Aboriginal people. Entitled ‘The Vanishing Tribes’, the photographs—many of which appear to have been taken during an earlier period of his career—celebrate the more traditional aspects of Aboriginal life.
- ²⁸ Diary, ‘Round Australia Tour’, 1961, Frank Hurley Papers, MS 883, Series 1, Item 28, Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia.
- ²⁹ Bickel, op. cit., p. 99.
- ³⁰ Bickel, *ibid.*, p. 71.
- ³¹ ‘The Vision of a Nation’, Frank Hurley Papers, MS 883, Series 3, Item 46, Manuscript Collection, National Library of Australia.

Myth, Dream, Reality



Cenotaph, Martin Place, Sydney, New South Wales



National War Memorial, Anzac Square, Brisbane, Queensland



Murray Street, Perth, Western Australia



Spring Street, Sydney, New South Wales



Circular Quay, Sydney, New South Wales



Pacific Highway, Sydney, New South Wales



Sydney Town Hall, George Street, Sydney, New South Wales



Wynyard Square, York Street, Sydney, New South Wales



Rundle Street, Adelaide, South Australia



King William Street, Adelaide, South Australia



Pyrmont and Darling Harbour Wharves, Sydney, New South Wales



AWA Tower, York Street, Sydney, New South Wales



Cradle Mountain, Tasmania



Valley of the Grose River, Blue Mountains, New South Wales



[Blue Mountains, New South Wales]



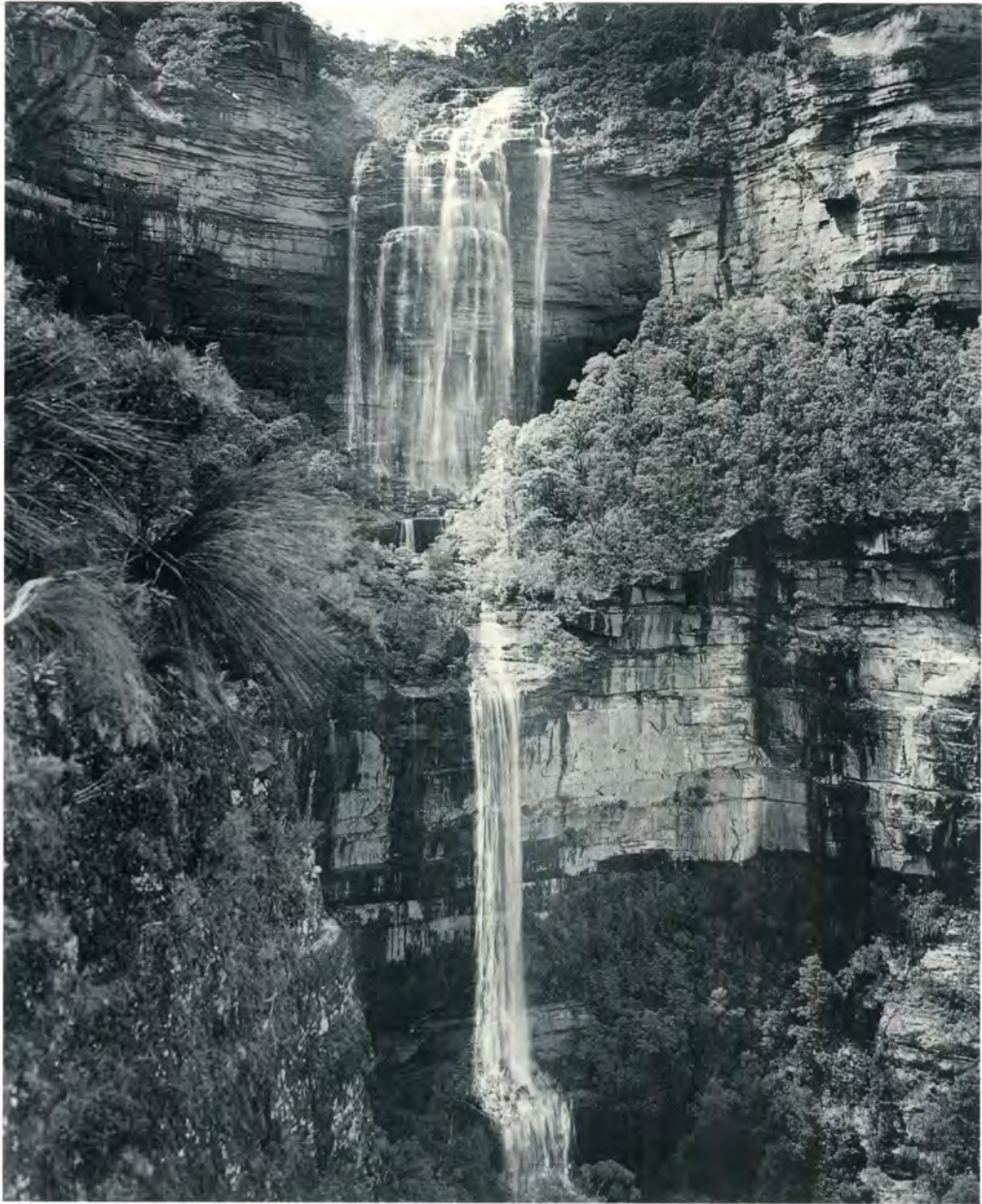
'The Australian Bush'



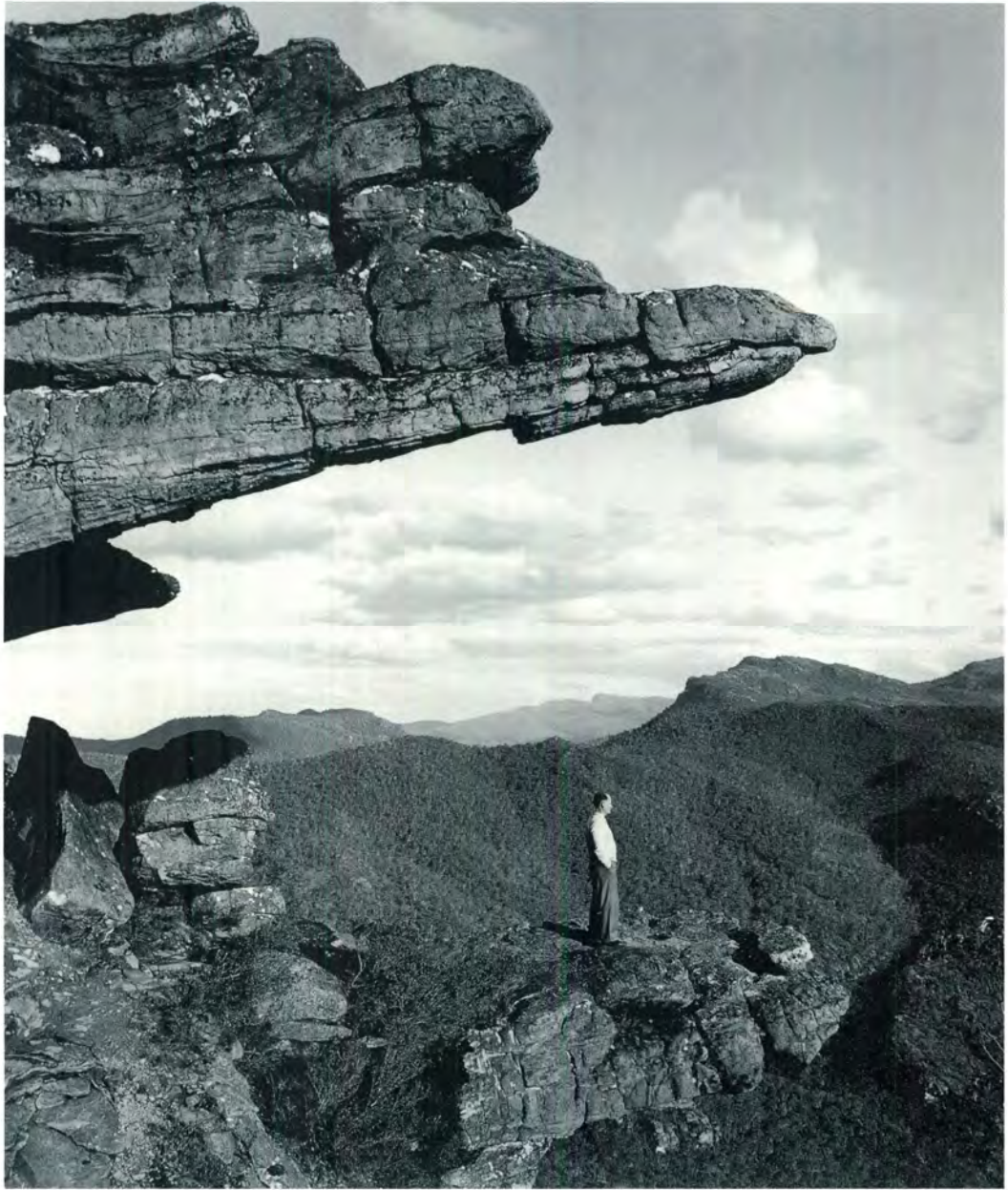
Orphan Rock, Blue Mountains, New South Wales



Western Macdonnell Ranges, Northern Territory



Wentworth Falls, Blue Mountains, New South Wales



The Balcony, Mt Victory, Grampians, Victoria



Bondi Beach, Sydney, New South Wales



Manly Beach, Sydney, New South Wales



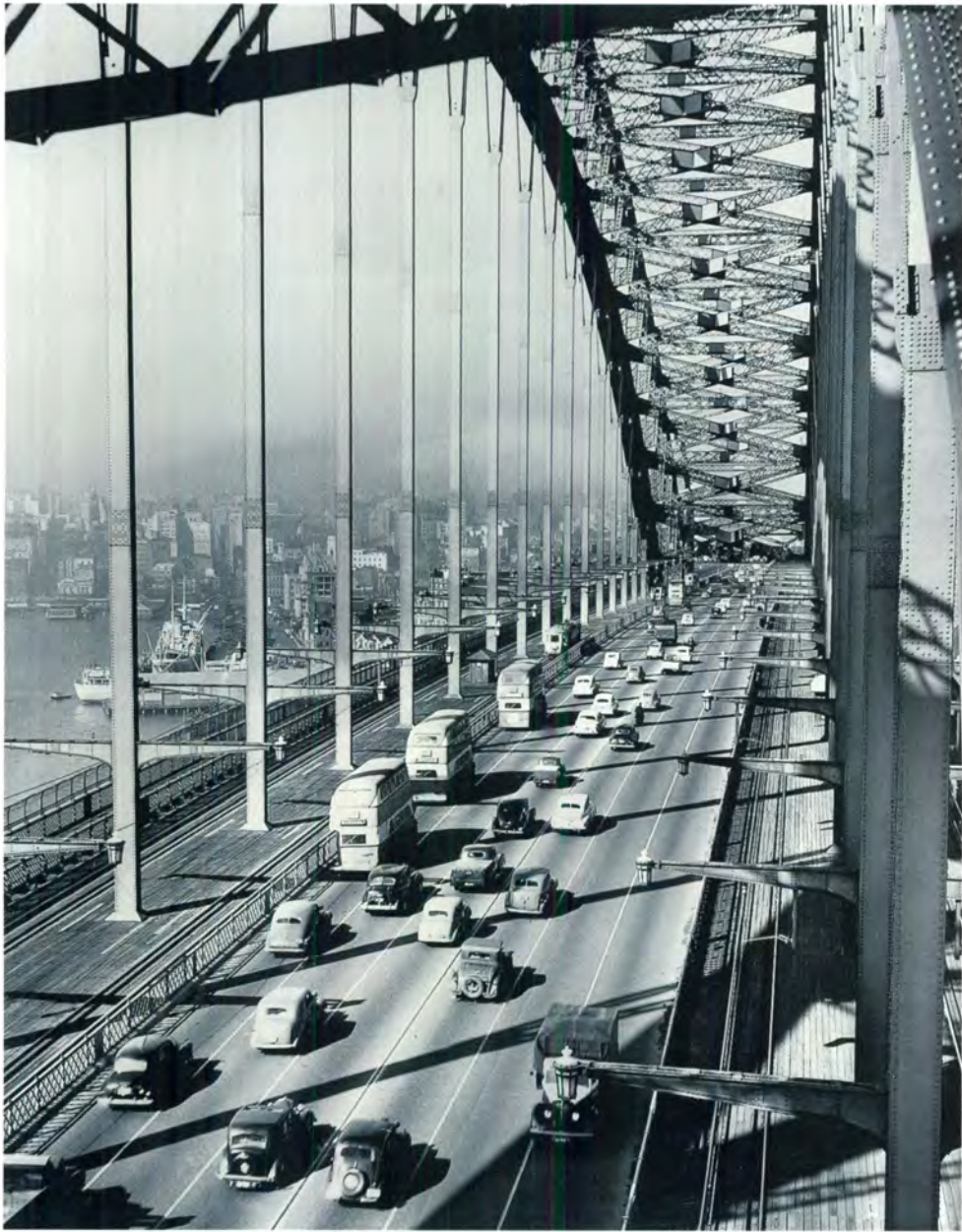
Ada, Sydney Harbour, Sydney, New South Wales



Cronulla Beach, Sydney, New South Wales



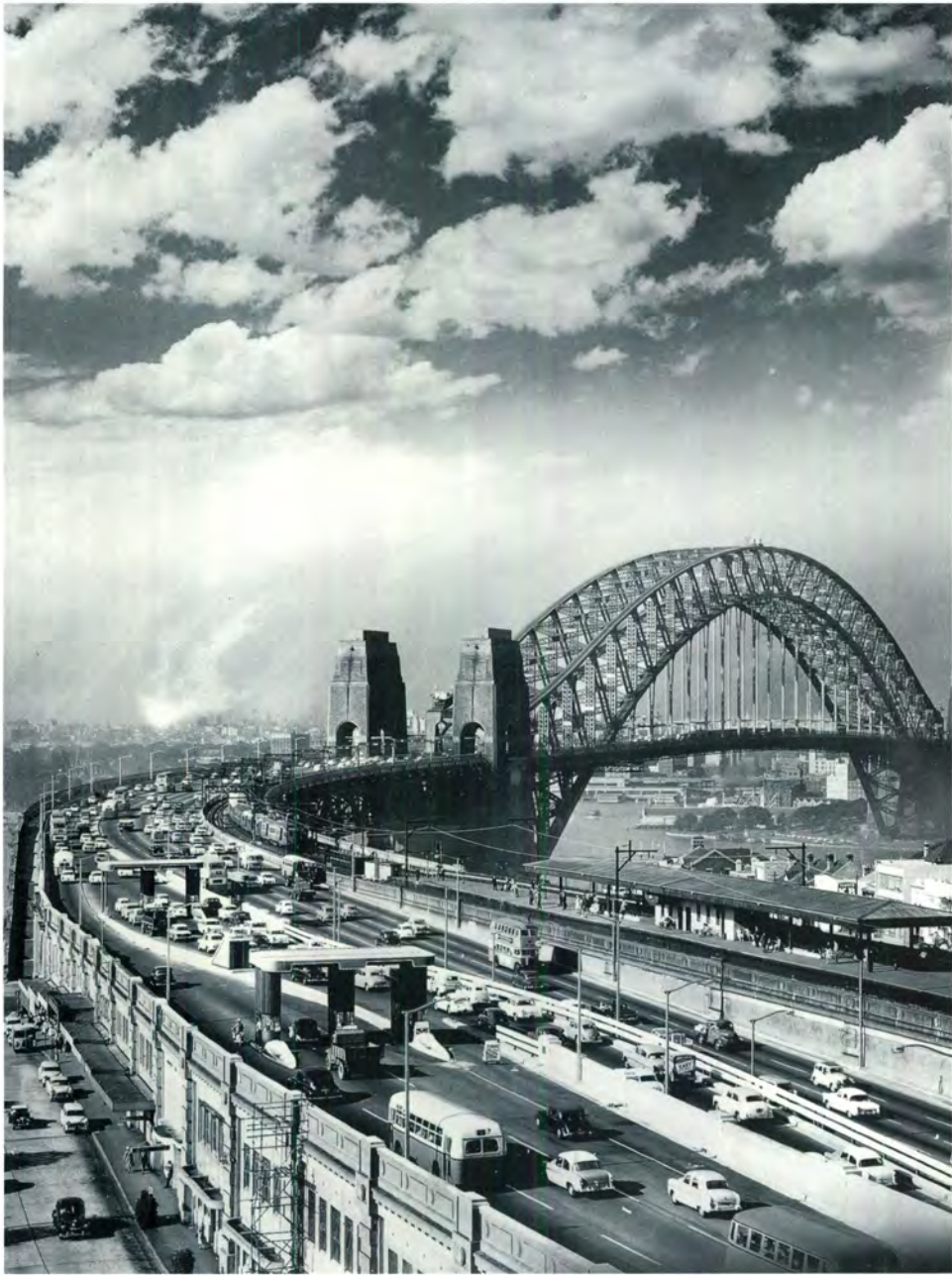
Sydney Harbour Bridge, Sydney, New South Wales



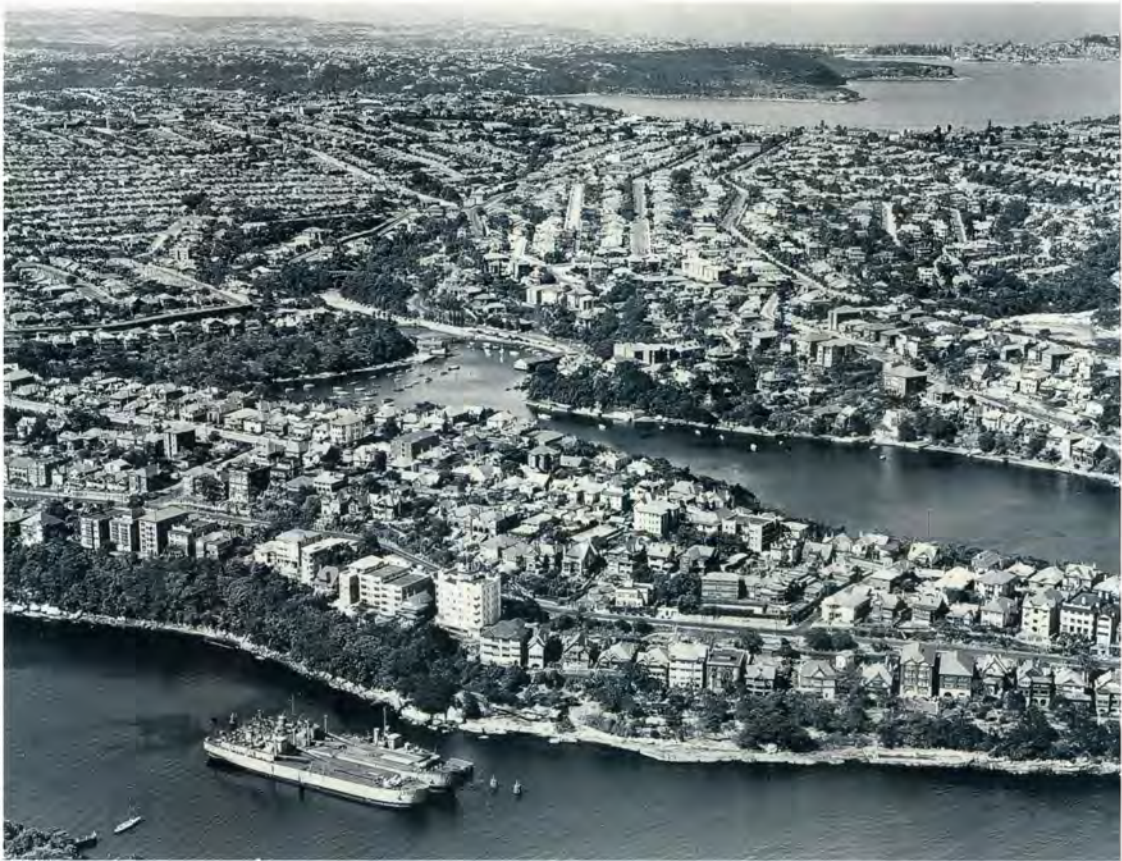
'Symphony in Steel'



Sydney Harbour Bridge from Circular Quay, Sydney, New South Wales



Sydney Harbour Bridge from Milsons Point, Sydney, New South Wales



Cremorne and Mosman, Sydney, New South Wales



Cronulla and Entrance to Port Hacking, Sydney, New South Wales



Lindfield, Sydney, New South Wales



Vineyards, Upper Swan River, Western Australia



Bondi Beach, Sydney, New South Wales



Upper Swan River near Guildford, Western Australia



BHP Steelworks, Newcastle, New South Wales



Kalgoorlie, Western Australia



Australian Iron and Steel, Port Kembla, New South Wales



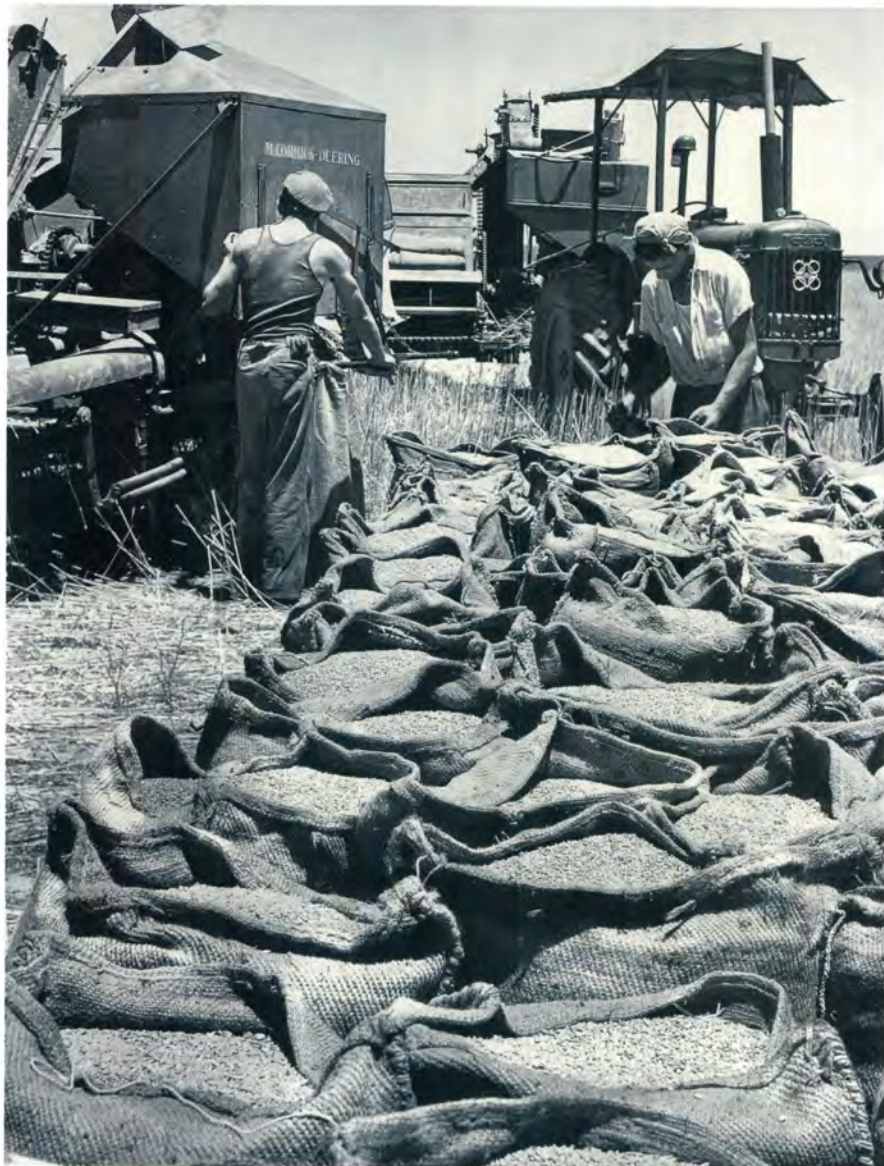
BHP Steelworks, Newcastle, New South Wales



Kalgoorlie, Western Australia



Tree-felling, North-East Tasmania



'Handling Wheat', Western Australia



Strawberry Farm near Brisbane, Queensland



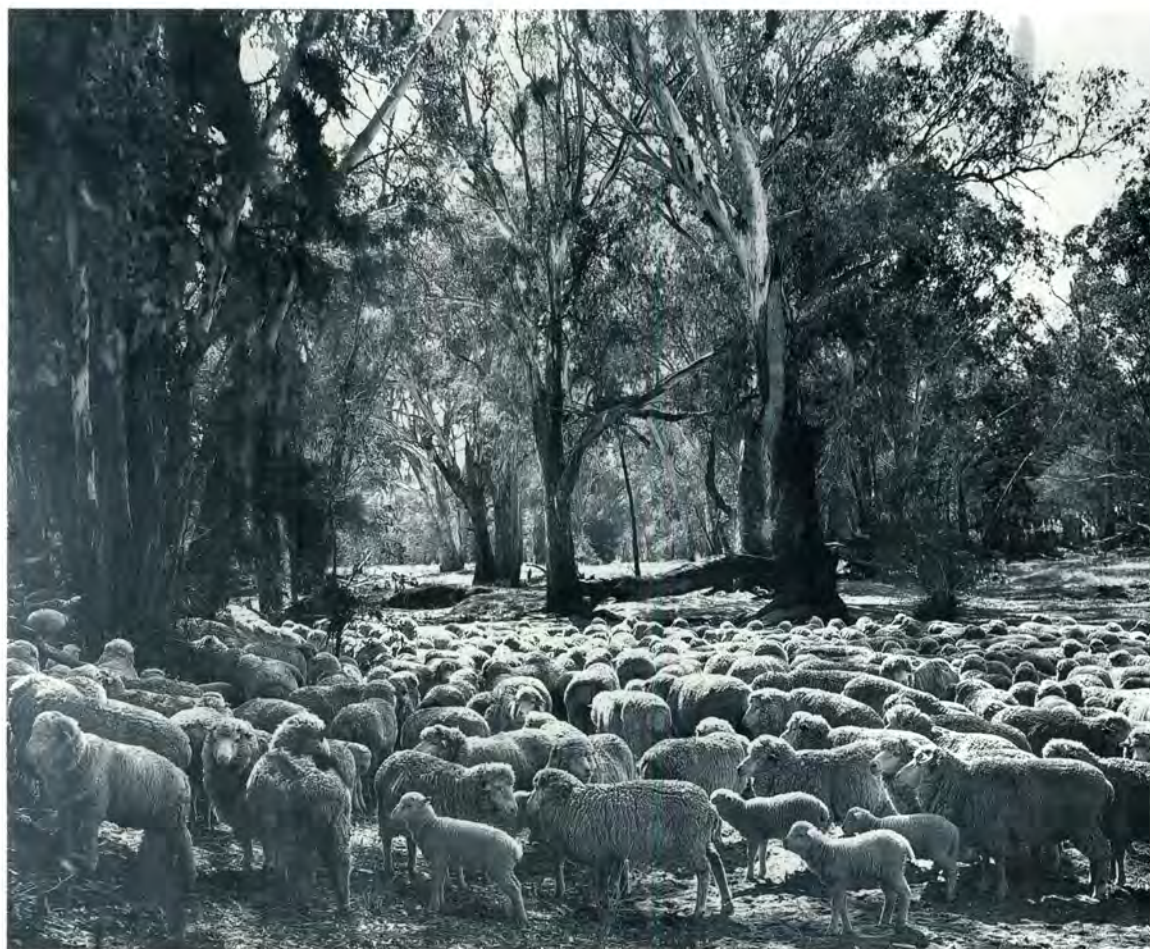
[Silos]



[Meatworks]



Shearers, Western Australia



'The Golden Fleece'



Goldsbrough Mort Wool Store, Darling Harbour, Sydney, New South Wales



Surf Carnival, Manly Beach, Sydney, New South Wales



'People of Sydney'



Surf Carnival, Manly Beach, Sydney, New South Wales



Randwick Racecourse, Sydney, New South Wales



Public Library of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales



Dixon Galleries, Public Library of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales



Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, New South Wales



University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales



Dental Surgeon and Nurse, Sydney, New South Wales



Office Workers, Sydney, New South Wales



Postal Workers, GPO, Martin Place, Sydney, New South Wales



Postal Workers, GPO, Martin Place, Sydney, New South Wales

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Frank Hurley—photographer, filmmaker, adventurer—was an extraordinary Australian. From the early twentieth century until his death in 1962, he created a stunning visual archive that chronicles the nation's achievements both abroad and at home.

Hurley's Australia showcases his impressive visual celebration of Australia in the period immediately after the Second World War. In his mission to capture Australia for Australians he travelled throughout the country photographing its vast landscape, its modern cities, its industrial strength and its agricultural riches. The vision he created captures the essence of a younger, more innocent nation.

In this collection of over 70 images we travel with Hurley to Tasmania to witness intimate scenes of the devastation caused by fire; to familiar national icons such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Bondi Beach; to cities and mountains and beaches; onto the street and into the sky.

John Thompson introduces Hurley's Australian photographs. He presents them through the lens of the era of their creation and widespread circulation—the 1950s—suggesting that today their power lies in the intense clarity with which they depict the realities and the myths of that age.

In a period in which an Australian future is being forged on the memory of the 1950s as a golden age, this collection is a timely reminder that the past is always part myth, part dream, part reality.