

A collection of rarely displayed images

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Photography Review

Arcadia: nineteenth century Australian photography
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Arcadia is a small but absorbing collection of twenty images from the Art Gallery of New South Wales' collection of nineteenth century Australian photography.

Lacking the dramatic scale or visual sophistication of great American photographers of this period--Timothy O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, Edward Muybridge and Adam Clark Vroman-- *Arcadia* nevertheless reveals aspects of rural life in South Australia, Queensland, Victoria and New South Wales between the mid-1880s and 1900.

Photography, in the form of the daguerreotype, was first introduced to Australia in 1841, two years after Louis Daguerre (1789-1851), its French inventor, had launched it in Paris. Within a short time studios sprang up in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and Adelaide producing thousands of portraits.

Despite its popularity, the daguerreotype was soon eclipsed by other photographic technology allowing the production of inexpensive multiple prints, stereoscopic reproductions, complex panoramas and a wide range of on-location home, farm and shop-front portraits.

While the demand for portraits seemed insatiable, so too was the interest in photographs of Australian bushland and other scenic views. International and domestic curiosity, and a reduction in the weight and volume of photographic equipment allowing for lengthier excursions into more remote bushland soon saw the emergence of a flourishing trade in landscape photographs.

By the 1880s large multi-functional photographic studios employing scores of printers, darkroom workers, retouchers, studio and field camera operators had set up shop. One such studio was the Sydney-based

Charles Kerry and Co. In 1895 the studio established its "Squatters Service"--a team of camera operators who traveled the country photographing the extensive land holdings of the Australia's wealthiest landowners. By the early 1900s Kerry had become a very wealthy and influential figure in Sydney ruling circles.

Government departments also began to expand their use of photography. Under the management of John Sharkey, the New South Wales Government Printing Office amassed a large collection of photographs and in 1888 displayed five volumes and 400 individual prints at the colony's Centennial Exhibition.

Arcadia, which draws from both sources--private studios and government departments--includes portraits of squatters, selectors, rural workers, Aborigines and several landscapes of the vast tracts of bushland then opened up to wool-growing and other forms capitalist profiteering.

From the mid-1880s through to the end of the century, landscape photography began to merge with, and contribute to, the creation of the conceptions and visual imagery associated with the development of the emerging nation-state.

This involved the development of a mythical version of Australian life, a land where Aboriginal civilisation would peacefully pass away, superseded by a social order free from class antagonisms and providing a decent future for all its citizens.

Photographers therefore revealed little of the ongoing war of attrition conducted against the Aborigines; the sharp political and economic antagonisms between wealthy squatters and small land-holders; or the industrial struggles developing between the emergent working class and capital in the new country.

Naturally these problems are present in the *Arcadia* exhibit, but for those with a critical eye and some understanding of the real history of the country the photographs on display provide a glimpse of rural

life at that time and an understanding of how the settlers saw Australia.

Photographers represented include Charles Bayliss, John Paine, Charles Rudd and several unnamed camera operators employed by Kerry and Co.

Bayliss (1850-1897) was a well-known and respected photographer. His Hill End and Gulgong township photographs, taken in 1872 in partnership with Henry Beaufoy Merlin, although not included in *Arcadia* are amongst the more striking and honest of photographic records of rural township life of that decade.

In 1886 Bayliss was hired to join a team from the NSW Royal Commission investigating water conservation. The team was sent to the Darling River, then in flood, in NSW's west. Six prints in the exhibition are from that assignment.

Perhaps one of the more beautiful and eerie images from this period is his *View from Dunlop Range, near Louth, Darling River (looking south)*, 1886. This sublime photograph reveals the real nature of the terrain confronting most of the new settlers: neither soft pastures nor pleasant hills but a harsh land, with miles of stones, dry bushes and unrelenting emptiness.

Huts at the spring, Mount Wellington, Tasmania, attributed to Charles Rudd (active 1872-1900) is another remarkable landscape. There are other interesting photographs of squatters outside their split wood homes; small farmers alongside their cottages; and even a quaint photograph of a rural rowing club. The dust, heat, flies; chronic health problems and other terrible privations are not visible but the faces of those pictured hint at a cruel and brutish life.

The exhibition also contains two carefully posed, but essentially mournful images of Aborigines. The first, *Aboriginals NSW*, is a studio portrait from Kerry and Co., of a mother and her four children rigged out in European clothes in front of a painted backdrop of bushland. Part of a wooden fence is used as a prop in an effort to add realism to the image. The worried look of the mother and the faintly amused, slightly suspicious gaze of her children contradicts this peaceful atmosphere. All are barefoot.

The second print, from 1886 by Bayliss is of a group of Aborigines from the Lower Murray River in South Australia. Its subjects are precisely arranged. The Aborigines, many dressed in European clothes, are in

traditional dugout canoes, spears in hand, on the edge of the river. Shot on location, the figures are stiff, formal, and the river undisturbed. The image has a peculiar, melancholic quality to it, almost as if Bayliss has photographed a wax display in a museum.

Bayliss' *Pressing wool bales* is another strangely tranquil scene, this time of rural wool production, Australia's then most profitable international export. The photo provides no hint of the class tensions that erupted into a violent nationwide industrial war between shearers and the landed ruling elite in 1891.

Overall, *Arcadia* is a worthwhile collection of rarely displayed work. The all too few showings of 19th century photography is not the fault of the Art Gallery of NSW but a legacy of the minimal funding allocated for photographic exhibitions in Australia. In fact, the first photographic collection by any state-owned art museum in Australia was not established until 1973. The AGNSW, which receives no government funding for acquisitions, first began its photographic collection in 1975.

Prints that should be readily available for all serious students of Australian photography include the *Sun Pictures of Victoria* by Richard Daintree and Antoine Fauchery, a former friend and associate of Nadar, one of the most creative and audacious of all 19th century photographers. Other works meriting a wider audience include Daintree's *Bush Travellers, Queensland* (1864-70), J. W. Lindt's New Guinea photographs and John Degotardi's photographic record of Sydney slums following the bubonic plague of 1900.



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