



Aboriginal tribesman, Palm Island, Queensland, 1930



Pearling look-out man, Thursday Island, 1930

Rediscovered Master:

THE EXTRAORDINARY STORY OF E.O. HOPPÉ

By Don Norris

Graham Howe's 'Dr. Livingstone I presume' moment was still a week away when he fetched up at a rambling old house in London's Notting Hill Gate. The home of a quite extraordinary and delightfully anachronistic picture library called the Mansell Collection (pre-history to 1940, specialising in Art and Architecture), it was, says Howe, 'a picture library straight out of Charles Dickens. It was an antiquated — and antiquarian — picture library. They would wrap up the pictures in brown paper and string and send them out on magazine requests. They weren't in the digital age. They had a telephone line and a fax machine but no computers.'

Howe had come to Notting Hill Gate looking for images by a man who had once been regarded as one of the world's finest photographers. His name was E.O. Hoppé.

And, as it turns out, the Mansell Collection played an important, if unintentional, role in Hoppé's richly undeserved obscurity.

Howe first learned of Hoppé when he was living in London in 1973. A freshly minted graduate of Prahran College, he says, 'I walked into the Photographers Gallery in Leicester Square and became employee number three.' In the course of his work there and later with the Royal Photographic Society, he got to know various luminaries of the English photographic scene, including a man named Bill Jay. Jay, who then edited *Creative Camera* magazine, was, as Howe puts it, almost an evangelist for photography.

'When I met him he said, "I've just come back from doing an oral history with E.O. Hoppé, the most famous photographer in the world in 1920", said Howe. I said, "Bill, you've gotta be kidding, I know my history and there are these



A cluster of bathers, Bondi Beach, Sydney, 1930



Aboriginal women looking at European film poster, Hermannsburg Luthern Mission Station, Central Australia, 1930

American photographers whose names all begin with S who were the most famous photographers in 1920." He said, "No, it's not true. I've read all the contemporaneous literature and Hoppé's name is everywhere but Steichan, Strand and Steiglitz are hardly mentioned at all — even in New York".'

Little was Howe to know that this was but the first straw in the wind. 'I put this information away in the back of my head, thinking "well, he's reliable, he knows his stuff".'

Howe in the meantime went on to become the founding director of the Australian Centre for Photography. He picked up a Masters of Fine Arts in Photography from UCLA, worked as curator for rock musician Graham Nash's famously extensive private photography collection, was curator for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and then, in the late 1980s he set up his own independent curatorial company. The Los Angeles based company is called Curatorial Assistance and has since toured hundreds of exhibitions.

Some 20 years after his conversation with Bill Jay, said Howe, 'I bumped into the grandson of E.O. Hoppé, and he said to me, "you're a photo curator, so tell me, was grandpa any good?"

'I honestly had to say that I didn't know. I'd seen about six prints by that time and I'd seen about six books, and they were kind of up and down. They were hauntingly beautiful and I didn't know why, but they were perhaps not edited with the knowing eye we have today. And he said, "Well, look into it...".'

Not long after the encounter with Hoppé's grandson, Howe came across an extended essay about the photographer by none other than Bill Jay. Written only a few years after Howe had met him, Jay's essay was illustrated with examples from the Hoppé family archives — and from the Mansell Collection. It so happened that Howe was planning a visit to London a couple weeks later, so he wrote to the Mansell Collection and told them he was coming to London, and that he'd like to look at their collection of Hoppé pictures.



Aborigines playing football at the Hermannsburg Lutheran Mission Station, Central Australia, 1930



Incident in play, Aboriginal war dance, Palm Island, Queensland, 1930

But when he turned up at Notting Hill Gate, they practically waved him away. As he put it, they said, ‘You don’t understand, this is a picture library organised by subject. You tell us what you’d like to research and we lend you the pictures.’

A week later, just before returning to LA, he once again knocked on the Mansell Collection’s door. This time he got tea and biscuits — and 15 minutes in the stacks with the advice to look in the Dance and the New York files.

‘So I go over to Dance and I look at Nijinsky in 1911 and amazing pictures of the best dancers of the 20th century. There’s Margot Fonteyn, 15 years old at Saddlers Wells Ballet. Gorgeous. I think “that’s pretty good, but I’m not overwhelmed.” So, I go to New York and I’m flipping through the Manhattan folder and I find a Paul Strand. It’s the right paper, it’s the right size, it’s 42nd Street with the elevated railway and the construction of space and it’s perfect... I flip it over, and it says, “E.O. Hoppé, 1919.”’

No longer merely intrigued, Howe asked himself, ‘What’s a German-born Brit doing in New York playing the same game as the early photo modernists?’

As so often happens in photography, the slight figure of serendipity then enters, stage left. Howe soon discovered that the Mansell Collection’s owners were ready to retire from the business and so, over the next year or so, he came to an agreement with them. ‘We work out a deal. I agree to sell the picture library for its owners and in return I will extract the Hoppé pictures.’

But, given the subject-based filing system, extracting those pictures was no trivial task. To be certain that no Hoppés were missed, it was necessary for Howe to look at every single image in the collection — all 1.3 million of them. ‘I had a little garret in the top of this house in Notting Hill Gate’, said Howe, ‘and I just worked from dawn until dusk for 6 weeks, 14 hours a day, seven days a week — it was heaven!’

In due course the well-winowed Mansell Collection became a part of the massive Time-Life holdings, while the Hoppés — some 10,000 of them — were transported to Los Angeles. It then took a further 10 years for Howe to collate, organise, conserve and catalogue the images.



Mr A. Wilson, publisher, and family at Collaroy Beach, Sydney, 1930



View of the Sydney Harbour Bridge under construction from The Rocks, 1930

As the cataloging process unfolded, it revealed a body of work of astonishing breadth. Hoppé was both a photographer of the first order and what we might nowadays characterise as an energetic networker. In the early years of the twentieth century he was a highly regarded portraiture artist who numbered George Bernard Shaw amongst his celebrity clientele. But his photographic interests went far beyond photographing the leading lights of London society. He also wrote for the photographic press, mounted exhibitions and photographed everything from ballet and architecture, to factories and landscapes.

In a fascinating aside, Graham Howe said that Hoppé may well have inspired the great American photographer Walker Evans. Apparently while in America photographing for what would eventually become a book called *Romantic America*, Hoppé visited and photographed in the same region of the American south to which Walker Evans would come six or eight years later — well after Hoppé's work had been published. The similarities, said Howe, between Evans's later pictures and Hoppé's images, are sufficiently arresting to make one wonder about the influence of the latter upon the former.

HOPPÉ IN AUSTRALIA

By 1930, when Hoppé arrived in Australia to take pictures for a book to be called *The Fifth Continent*, he was a photographer at the top of his game. He already had half a dozen sumptuously produced volumes of photography to his credit and he was a frequent contributor of picture stories to numerous magazines.

Summing up the body of work from that 1930 visit, Graham Howe says Hoppé, 'brought to us an enormous gift as I see it — a portrait of Australia's people and places.' While the photographs speak eloquently for themselves, it is nevertheless illuminating to know that they were taken over a period of just 10 months. In that time, Hoppé criss-crossed the country to produce a collection of images that is truly astonishing in its scope.

As you turn the pages of *E.O. Hoppé's Australia*, it's hard not to be impressed by the breadth of subject matter and the masterful command of photographic expression. Gritty documentary images stand side by side with candid portraiture and slice of life street photography. Evocative landscapes sit together with extraordinary portraits of Aboriginal people in places as widely separated as Hermannsburg and Palm Island. Glossy magazine feature shots of glamorous Sydney girls at Bondi are juxtaposed with abstract studies of beach goers and environmental portraits of Australian 'types'.

The images reproduced in our pages are just a tiny sample of Hoppé's richly nuanced and acutely observed Australian images. For every picture we've published, there are half a dozen more that had an equal claim for consideration. At a panel discussion of Hoppé's work held in June at Customs House (where a selection of the photographs from *E.O. Hoppé's Australia* were on exhibit), the *Sydney Morning Herald's* eminent photography critic, Robert McFarlane aptly used

the word 'fresh' to describe Hoppé's work. Such is the vitality and assured sense of composition, that it would be very surprising indeed if many of these images did not find their way into the pantheon of Australian photography.

Although Hoppé had the kind of dapper sensibility that extended to wearing spats as the occasion allowed, his portraits offer the plainest evidence that he photographed people of all sorts with a kind of respectful egalitarianism. Like many in his day, he was interested in the idea of quintessential characters, of national 'types', but though he very much sought to create a portrait of the Australian character, Hoppé never treated his subjects as objects or curiosities. Whether it is a portrait of a Tasmanian sheep farmer, an eminent personage, a shivering girl and her family at the beach or a central Australian aboriginal man in full war paint, in Hoppé's calm regard, the subjects are always in full possession of their dignity.

When Hoppé arrived in Sydney, the Harbour Bridge's now iconic span was only months away from being completed. Entire books have been devoted to this edifice, so it is all the more amazing that this prodigiously talented visitor should have managed to see and portray it in ways that allow one to see it anew. That he was able to maintain this energetic creativity wherever he went across Australia is all the more impressive.

By the time Hoppé sailed home, the chill winds of the Great Depression had begun to be felt in Australia. The publishing landscape had shifted too, and the publisher who had commissioned *The Fifth Continent* was not the one who published it in 1931. Hoppé had taken over 3300 photographs in Australia, of which some 160 subsequently found their way into the book. As Graham Howe notes in the opening essay of *E.O. Hoppé's Australia*, 'The images chosen for the book do not represent the most striking or artistic impressions that he made in Australia. They instead seem to reflect the publishers' desire for a marketable travelogue rather than Hoppé's expressed hope to create a picture of the Australian character.' The book was sold here, but it seems not to have done so in great numbers.

Hoppé's descent into obscurity, says Graham Howe, could be argued to have been caused (or at least given added propulsion) by his decision upon retirement to turn over the bulk of his work to the Mansell Collection. It is hard to conceive of an organising principle more perfectly calculated to disguise and obliterate a body of work than one which sorts everything by subject, that most brutally utilitarian criterion of all.

Happily for the history of photography, it is now at least possible that E.O. Hoppé will once again astonish and delight lovers of photography. It took the likes of Bill Jay to champion the legacy until someone like Graham Howe came along. Howe's dedication to, and passion for, the work of E.O. Hoppé is a rare and special thing. And we're all the luckier for it. ■

E.O. Hoppé's Australia is available from all good bookstores.



Over the rooftops, Stanley Street, Sydney, 1930