



# Master of our past

A pictorial treasure trove shows the nation grow, writes **Steve Meacham.**

**T**HEY provide a unique glimpse of an Australia in transition. A treasure store of 3300 negatives shot by one of the forgotten masters of 20th century photography which, for more than 50 years, lay in the dusty files of a London picture library.

There is the poet Dorothea Mackellar, studies of opal miners at Coober Pedy and woodcutters in South Australia. Street scenes of all our major cities during the Depression. Exquisite frames of the indigenous peoples of Palm Island and the central deserts.

All were taken during a 10-month odyssey around Australia in 1930 by a German-born Englishman who was then one of the most celebrated portrait photographers in the world.

On Tuesday, 31 newly rescued photographs by Emil Otto Hoppe (pronounced hop-ay) will go on display at Customs House. It will be the first time they have been seen in Australia since Hoppe held an exhibition at the David Jones Gallery before leaving these shores 76 years ago.

They have re-emerged thanks to a remarkable piece of intercontinental detective work by Graham Howe, a Sydney-born photographic curator who now lives in Los Angeles.

Howe's involvement began in 1972 when he bumped into an American photographic historian who had just interviewed a man he said "was once the most famous photographer in the world". Hoppe, born in Munich in 1878, was 94, and would die that year.

Howe listened as his colleague described how Hoppe had been the

Edwardian equivalent of Cecil Beaton or David Bailey, commissioned to photograph all the leading celebrities who passed through London. Among those who posed for his lens: Dame Joan Sutherland, Thomas Hardy, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Vaslav Nijinsky, Albert Einstein and most of the royal family.

Such commissions made Hoppe a wealthy man with a 32-room home in London. But by 1920 he had tired of "catering to the whims of the vain", Howe says. Illustrated magazines, with their demand for high-quality photographs of exotic locations, gave Hoppe the chance to travel, first to America, then - eventually - to Australia for a book he called *The Fifth Continent*.

Though intrigued, Howe forgot about Hoppe until 1993 when he met Hoppe's grandson in Los Angeles at a party. "Tell me," said the descendant, "Was Grandpa any good?"

Howe did not know. He had only seen a few of Hoppe's photographs and a couple of the near 30 books he produced. But by now Howe was intrigued and within weeks was knocking on the door of a picture library in Notting Hill Gate, London.

"Mr Hoppe did something very foolish in 1945," Howe explains by phone from Los Angeles. "By then he was enormously famous in celebrity and art photography circles. But he sold his photographic archive to this picture library. He very quickly regretted it because his work was filed by subject matter and was lost within the bigger library."

When the door of the Mansell Collection opened, Howe was confronted by "a place straight out of a Charles Dickens novel, floor to ceiling with old files and ancient people". They told him to go away. But a week later Howe returned, this time "with tea and biscuits". It worked. The ancients pointed out two files: one marked "Dance", the other "New York".

Under Dance, Howe found the wonderful Hoppe portraits he expected: a teenage Fonteyn, Nijinsky in his prime. But it was the New York file that contained the big surprise. One photograph stood out.

"My little heart starts beating," recalls Howe, who worked for many years in the Royal Photographic Society's historic collection in London and later founded the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney in 1974.

"I thought I'd found a vintage Paul Strand, a blue chip piece of collectable photographic history." It had all the hallmarks of the great American modernist photographer: "A New York street scene, cubist, highly organised, layered space". But when Howe turned the photograph over he was amazed to find: "E. O. Hoppe, 1919".

How could this be, thought Howe. How could a pioneering work of American modernism be the work of a German-born Brit?

Realising more of Hoppe's "magnificent masterworks" lay hidden in the files, Howe arranged to catalogue the entire collection of 1.3 million photographs. "It took six weeks, working seven days a week, 14 hours a day." By the end he had identified 5000 Hoppe photos, and arranged to buy them.

It took another decade to organise them and publish the first book, *Amerika*, a collection of Hoppe's work in the US. But Howe has always believed the Australian photos are among Hoppe's finest work.

"He spent almost a year here documenting everything very deliberately. He loved the place, visiting every state and photographing ordinary people. It's a wonderful collective portrait of Australia - and we now know he was the first one to do it. Hoppe was the first to cover the entire country, not just geographically and topographically, but socially.

"The great photographers of Aust-





ralia would be Harold Cazneaux, David Moore, Max Dupain. All were giants. But Hoppe, I think, was better. He provided the most accurate, the most penetrating portrait of the country through an outsider's eyes."

According to Gael Newton, senior curator of photography at the National Gallery of Australia, "the images, thankfully intact and preserved as a single archive, present an unprecedented picture of Australia at the beginning of the 1930s. No other photographer, Australian or foreign, had presented such a comprehensive view of the nation by that time."

The *Herald* photographic critic, Robert McFarlane, says: "At the time Hoppe came to Australia his vision was

far more modern than any of the other photographers working here. They never really had his purity of vision.

"The other thing that's really interesting is how quickly he latched on to the Australianness of the place. There's one particular photograph that shows Bradman's score chalked on the back of a board. He had a sweeping edge to his vision. It was unsentimental too."

Howe's favourites? Hoppe's photos of the Easter Show, a Woolloomooloo street scene showing a man with a tyre over his shoulder heading to work ("it could be nowhere else but Australia," Howe says), and the studies of opal miners ("he gets a quintessential quality of what it is to be Australian in these portraits. He comprehends it in a way

that seems true and unadorned.")

But most of all Howe picks out Hoppe's startling images of Palm Island and its people. "They seem to cover not just the photographic beauty of the noble savage, but somehow penetrate the psyche of indigenous people of Australia," Howe says. "Here was the hottest celebrity photographer of his time trotting around the outback, examining a culture that was in stage of transformation."

Hoppe's Australia, the exhibition at Customs House, May 8 - July 1. Book published by W.W. Norton, New York, \$75.



Her country ... Dorothea Mackellar



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Day on the strand ... the publisher A. Wilson and his family at Collaroy Beach. Photos: E.O. Hoppe