SHOW
the photography of Frank Hurley

-MAN-

Julian Thomas

National Library of Australia 1990
'In the Potters' Shop at Hebron', c. 1946 (28.3 x 38.5cm)
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THE photographer Frank Hurley (1885–1962) is a legendary figure in
Australian cultural history; here I interpret the legend as part of the history.
It is an account of Hurley’s ‘showmanship’, that is, his professional sense of
performance and display, and some links which can be made between that
showmanship and wider histories. I hope it suggests some general ideas
about the significance of Hurley’s work and career. My interpretation is
possibly more critical than those biographical accounts which have appeared
so far, and I have refrained from repeating well-known tales of heroism and
adventure. Previous writers on Hurley have helped me a great deal, and two
books in particular: David P. Millar’s From Snowdrift to Shellfire (Sydney
1984) and Frank Legg and Toni Hurley’s Once More On My Adventure
(Sydney 1966).

Much of the research for the essay which follows, and for the
Showman exhibition, was done while I was a Harold White Fellow at the
National Library of Australia. I wish to thank the Library for the
opportunity to work on its large collections of Frank Hurley’s photographs,
diaries, books and manuscripts. I am much indebted to the many staff
members who have helped me with particular tasks and inquiries. Some of
the ideas presented here were first aired at a public lecture organised by the
Library in May 1990; my thanks also to those who made comments and
asked questions on that occasion. The National Film and Sound Archive,
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also assisted in my work.
From Argonauts of the South, 1925
The Showman as Hero

He was a determined and indomitable Peter Pan, seeing adventure everywhere and in everything, and adding a personal flourish to every reality. 'Cappy' was wholly a showman who worked hard at being Frank Hurley, explorer, cameraman, and intrepid adventurer, to whom the whole world was a challenge.

Maslyn Williams, 1966

THE word 'showman' was frequently used in the early decades of Australian cinema. Although it referred generally to a man’s professional work in the industry — women were usually 'showgirls'— it implied more than an occupation. It attributed style and adventure to the person himself, and it suggested a talent for performance, for enthusiastic, dubious and entertaining self-promotion. The showman was part of the show.

Frank Hurley was a dedicated photographer, a popular writer, a serious businessman and a successful showman. He worked energetically and he travelled widely. His books and films were about travel, war and adventure. This work is now generally regarded as 'documentary', but it is important to recognise its element of showmanship: as a photographer and writer he was most interested in a dramatically telling image or story, and he had no qualms about altering his materials to heighten their effect.

His own numerous accounts of his experiences in Antarctica, Papua, Europe, the Middle East and Australia have been retold many times. The story, thus repeated, is a showman's story. It is an adventure serial, starting simply and following its protagonist through exotic locations. In 1898 the thirteen-year-old hero threw two inkwells at a teacher. 'An inkwell launched me into adventure,' he declared in Argonauts of the South, his book about...
the Mawson and Shackleton expeditions to Antarctica. He describes how he ran away from home in Sydney and found a job in a Lithgow foundry. While there he became interested in photography, and his father, a retired compositor, helped him join a Sydney postcard business. Back in the city, he gained a reputation for unusual, dramatic pictures: his favourite subjects were oncoming trains and waves crashing against cliffs. The risks involved in taking them gave the photographs an edge of excitement, but he was looking for more substantial adventure. His chance came when he persuaded Douglas Mawson to employ him as photographer on the 1911–13 Australasian Antarctic Expedition.

From that point he was always mobile. The film he made about Mawson’s expedition was a great success. On the strength of that, Ernest Shackleton appointed him photographer on the unsuccessful 1914–16 Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. In 1917 he was made the official Australian war photographer, working in Flanders and Palestine. In Egypt he married Antoinette Thierault; in 1918 they returned to Australia, where he began exhibiting his Antarctic and war photography, and she had twin daughters. He travelled to Papua three times in the 1920s, making several popular documentary and fiction films. In this period he also made successful tours of Britain and the United States. Between 1929 and 1931 he made two final expeditions with Mawson to Antarctica. He worked for the Australian film studio Cinesound in the thirties, and was an official photographer once more during the Second World War, again based in the Middle East. He came back to Australia in 1946, aged sixty-one, and began a series of long car journeys, preparing books on Australian subjects.

‘In seventy-six years of restless life Hurley travelled a million miles in every continent of the world’ says the blurb of the earliest Hurley biography, published four years after his death in 1962. *Once More On My Adventure* goes on:

He filmed pearl divers off Thursday Island, headhunters on the unexplored Fly River in New Guinea, whalers in the Southern Ocean. He shared a tent with Shackleton in the Antarctic and the tiny cockpit of Ross and Keith Smith’s aeroplane during their pioneer flight from London to Sydney. He crashed his own aircraft at Athens in an attempt to fly the first land plane from Australia to England. He established a day’s record for polar sledging that still stands. In New York he wrote a bestseller in ten days. In Tobruk he shot a scoop film of the siege. In Cairo he had the only holiday of his life — his honeymoon. He was frost-bitten and snow-blinded, nearly taken prisoner by the Turks, arrested by Persians, sniped by a German, almost banquetted to death by Arab sheiks,
rescued from the inside of a whale by Norwegians, and in his mid-seventies, helped by Australians up a 300 foot rope climb from a cave where he had suffered a heart attack while filming in a temperature of 114 degrees.

The adventure serial leaves out much, and includes some things which are not quite true. The Fly was not unexplored, despite Hurley's claims to have been the first white man to visit parts of it. He did not share the cockpit of the Smiths' plane on their flight from London to Sydney: he joined them in Queensland. He did do an enormous amount of travelling, yet he also did significant work in Sydney, spending eight years at the Australian film studio Cinesound. But the point is not to deny Hurley his showmanship. Rather, I want to emphasise that this adventuring identity was an act of imagination, for both Hurley and his audiences. It was — as all biographies are — an edited version, a selection of certain aspects of his life and a repudiation of other parts.

Hurley's American publisher George Putnam said about him, 'Now and then there appears out of the confusion of our complex and noisy civilisation a being seemingly strayed from some more romantic day.... In an age when human effort so largely tends to make life a communal and unindividualistic affair, the figure of a man who desires solitude and the experience of penetrating an unknown country, stands forth unique and somewhat incongruous.' Putnam applauds Hurley's desire for solitude, his robust individualism. But while this isolation was part of Hurley's character, as far as we — Hurley's audiences — are concerned, it is a carefully created impression. It is hard to imagine Hurley really doing all his work entirely alone, since the things he wanted to do almost always required assistance from others. He was not someone separated from others; he lived with his wife and four children in Sydney, and rarely by himself when he was travelling. More than this, his work always depended on others: his family at home, and the assistants, engineers and technicians who kept him going when he was away.

There is no doubt that he had, as Putnam suggests, a 'desire for solitude'. His daughters regarded him as 'anti-social'. One of them thought he should never have married. His wife, Antoinette, thought he was a 'loner'. What he wanted was solitude, and what the showman's figure of the adventurer required was an extreme individualism, a total separation from 'complex and noisy civilisation'. In his diaries there is a revealing treatment of those liminal moments when this separation is effected. Hurley crossed out in pencil his description of leaving Sydney for Papua in 1920:
The crossed out words read: 'My deep regrets are for leaving The wife & my two little ones who now are arriving at that interesting & lovable age of toddling & articulating & of both together. Still, 12 years ground work of making a reputation for travel pictures cannot be thrust aside especially as this venture is likely to recoup me for all my years of adventure & toil.'

Presumably these lines were crossed out when he was editing the diaries for the *Pearls and Savages* book, the best-seller he wrote in New York in ten days. Later there is a sentence describing 'The wife and little ones and my old friends Alison and [indecipherable] waiting until we had passed beyond their vision'. The words printed in bold here were crossed out by Hurley, so that the edited sentence referred only to 'my friends waiting...'.

The showman imagined this adventurous identity, and, as Maslyn Williams said, he worked hard to publicise it. The figure of the adventurer was not simply a ploy which Hurley used to attract people to his work, since it was a central part of that work. Nor did showmanship end there: an adventure story required an adventurous world, a world which was strange and dangerous. If, as Putnam’s masculine remark implied, heroism consisted in ‘penetrating an unknown country’, then the way of the adventurer had to be shown as difficult and obstructed. Hurley’s books and pictures make
motifs out of the difficulties of travelling. On the Mawson expedition to Antarctica he wanted to show the severity of the climate, so he photographed people leaning apparently impossibly forward into high winds. The image was used on the cover of Mawson’s book about the expedition, *The Home of the Blizzard*.

In Papua, in his pictures of the jungle, Hurley found another way of representing the obstructiveness of the exotic. The photograph from *Pearls and Savages* which is reproduced here is characteristic of his Papuan photography in its simple contrast between the resistant thickness of the vegetation and the open water of the river.

*Hand coloured lantern slide from the Pearls and Savages series, c. 1923 (8 x 10cm)*
The title slide from Hurley’s *Pearls and Savages* set of lantern slides locates the white hero among a mysterious concentration of exotic figures. The slide emphasises its authorship, through the prominence of the words ‘Capt. Frank Hurley’s’, and the vulnerability of its author, through the threatening figure on the right of the main title, who is aiming an arrow at Hurley. It is an excellent example of Hurley’s showmanship, partly because it is so clearly the darkroom composition of a virtuoso, skilfully combining and arranging dramatic elements. It also shows how Hurley’s sense of drama worked to create an impression of himself, the brave adventurer. Moreover, the composition of this image suggests a rationale for this showmanship. Hurley composed the image in a way which he thought would appeal to his Western audience. A successful travelogue had to be adventurous, and adventure was to be found in exotic parts of the world. Such places were exciting because they were dangerous; therefore the heroes had to be brave. Exotic places were also, of course, unknown places; therefore the heroes had to be explorers.

*Hand coloured lantern slide, c. 1923 (8 x 10cm)*
AS a supposedly solitary adventurer, revealing the secrets of the unknown while remaining enigmatic, Hurley’s public persona conformed to popular heroic convention. The point can be made more strongly: his specific sense of what adventure was, of what the exotic was and where it could be found, was widely shared in Australia and the West. It coincided with a general sense of imperial adventure. Hurley spent a lifetime looking for adventure: the result was a career directly shaped by the dynamics of twentieth-century imperialism. His work was carried along on global currents of colonialism and war.

From this premise an alternative account of his travels might be developed. Hurley’s trips to Antarctica were made possible by a combination of imperial rivalry, scientific interest and the huge popularity and profitability of Antarctic photography. Shackleton’s ambitious and expensive plan to cross the Antarctic continent was motivated by his patriotic desire for Britain to be ‘first’; later, Mawson’s 1929–31 expeditions claimed Australian sovereignty over a large portion of the continent. Hurley’s visits to Papua, which were funded in part by the British film industry and the Anglican Board of Missions, were engagements with the unknown — the people he called savages — and the Australian colonial administration. His relations with the colonisers and the colonised were often difficult: in 1923, for example, his methods of collecting artefacts were the subject of an official inquiry, much to his annoyance. He presented colonial conflicts melodramatically in his 1926 feature The Jungle Woman.
Hurley went to Europe and the Middle East to photograph a world war which was the inevitable result of imperialism. He returned for the Second World War, and spent time subsequently in the Middle East, making films for the British Government, which had become the dominant foreign power in the region. While Hurley made dozens of newsreel items and short films showing how the Arab world had progressed under British influence, the British Government’s League of Nations Mandate in Palestine was collapsing. Hurley found himself in a complex and violent political situation, where two emerging and conflicting forces, anti-colonial Arab nationalism and Zionist settlement, were opposed to British administration.

His work in Australia, which he took up again when he returned in 1946, could also be interpreted as a form of colonial, or imperial, photography. Hurley believed Australia was the ‘best country in the world’. His work emphasised the ‘romance’ and achievements of white settlement, and Australia’s place in the Empire. In his view, Australia was an outstanding example of successful colonisation. Hard work, ingenuity, and the vision of a
few founding heroes had transformed Australia from ‘a trackless wilderness’ into a thriving, modern nation. Hurley’s Australian work celebrated picturesque landscapes, industrial and agricultural productivity, and clean, prosperous cities.

Clearly an account of Hurley’s career which saw him as a colonial photographer would emphasise different parts of his life from the ones which most appealed to the showman himself. It would address some of the problems he faced in his career, where his progress really was blocked, rather than the triumphant achievements which have been written about so often. This is the line of inquiry pursued here, although there is not enough space to deal with the full range of Hurley’s imperial and colonial entanglements. A few instances can be examined which will show how, in a number of ways, his showmanship contributed to these difficulties.

Concerning his experiences in Papua, it was apparently Hurley’s desire for spectacle which created the circumstances of his dispute with the colonial administration. The popular success of the Papuan material depended on Hurley convincing his audiences and readers that these films, photographs and the book really did describe an exotic, unknown location. He had to do this in the United States where, as he later complained, ‘cannibal stories were hackneyed’. So he claimed for his work an extra degree of realism: his feature *The Jungle Woman* was sold on the basis of its authentic location, and his book and documentary film *Pearls and Savages* presented themselves as the results of a scientific study of the area rather than a mere journey through it. He suggested that his observations and ideas were scientifically important, despite the fact that he changed the emphasis and content of his material as he went, responding to audience demand. Thus in the United States he changed the name of *Pearls and Savages* to *The Lost Tribe*, and proposed that the people he had ‘discovered’ at Lake Murray were descended from one of the ‘lost tribes of Israel’.

The scientific status of his second Papuan expedition in 1922–23 was particularly important to him. He took with him Allan McCulloch, from the Australian Museum in Sydney, and arranged for F.E. Williams, the Assistant Government Anthropologist, to join the party in Papua. As it turned out, Williams spent little time with them. McCulloch and Hurley applied themselves to collecting what they called ‘specimens’ for the Museum. These were artefacts of various kinds: shields, spears, bull-roarers and skulls. At a village on Lake Murray, Hurley and McCulloch found no one around. They went into a large communal house and found the villagers’ belongings in the rafters.
‘Though feeling compunction for our actions, we ransacked them’ Hurley wrote in his book *Pearls and Savages*. ‘Skulls, human bits, and tit-bits filled our bone-bag; whilst axes, knives and fabrics were substituted. Surely, indeed, Father Christmas had visited the house! Iron and steel replaced bone and stone, and a million years were bridged in a day!’ *Pearls and Savages* claims that Hurley’s enthusiasm was purely scientific:

From a dim alcove I gave a yell of delight! We had discovered treasures beyond bonanza! Human heads! Stuffed heads! What luck!

Skulls painted and decorated had grinned from every niche, but heads — stuffed heads! Glorious beyond words! Had we raided a bank and carried off the bullion we could scarcely have been more pleased than with such desirable objects.

This, of course, is scientifically speaking, for I can scarcely conceive anything so gruesome as these hideous human trophies of the head-hunters...

What sort of people could these be that so callously made toys of their victims? Infinitely barbarous, ferocious, and cruel, with no feeling nor thought for human agony and suffering, and I shuddered to think of the ghastly scenes that had taken place in the small clearing by the gloomy bamboos.

Reports of ‘irregularities’ reached the colonial administration, and the collection was impounded in Port Moresby while investigations were made. Hurley conducted a furious campaign in the Sydney press. ‘HURLEY NOT A PIRATE’ ran one of the *Sun*’s headlines. Hurley’s view was that the goods he had taken without permission belonged in a museum, regardless of the interests of their manufacturers and owners. Any suggestion of impropriety on his part was an attack on his honour. In the end, the administration allowed him to keep almost all of the items he had taken. F.E. Williams wrote a report about ‘the collection of curios’, pointing out that the removal of goods to museums could not be justified as a useful, scientific or moral action in itself. He proposed a paternalistic ‘ethics of collecting’, directed at the preservation of indigenous culture. Hurley’s frustration with the whole affair was well-expressed in his diary: ‘Strangely enough the Officials of Papua, with few exceptions, are so narrow minded as not to be able to see nor appreciate beyond the official “self-centredness” and short-sightedness of their mean conceptions.’ He went on:
The diary reads: ‘We are accused with practically being pirates, chasing & terrifying the people & robbing their villages! Such an absurd & fabulous rumour is a direct imputation against our honour & reputations. I am heartily wild & disgusted with the amazing excesses to which the Administration indulges itself in red taped officialism & its endeavour to harass all with whom it may have dealings. It is absurdly jealous of “outsiders” trespassing on its sacred territory & prosecuting original work which the administration itself fails in doing. I have discussed the ignominious position in which McCulloch & myself have been placed & we have decided to take up a dignified & hostile attitude to the imputations of which we are supremely innocent.’

But Hurley was not supremely innocent. Nor was he innocent when he claimed later, back in Sydney, that he had ‘discovered’ previously unknown parts of Papua. Embarrassingly enough, Papua’s Lieutenant-Governor, Hubert Murray, wrote to the Sydney Morning Herald debunking the idea.

In Papua, Hurley’s showmanship was directly entangled with colonialism. As an official photographer in both World Wars, his desire for
spectacle created quite different problems. Like many other photographers, Hurley was accustomed to combining images from a number of negatives in one finished picture. He would often add, for example, a dramatic cloud formation or a sunset to heighten the effect of a landscape or a building. This kind of darkroom composition was generally regarded as a legitimate photographic practice. Indeed, the ability to do it well was a desirable skill. On the whole, Hurley did do it well, and the result was often a romantic picture, notwithstanding his customary bright, hard light and strong contrasts. Hurley's dramatically thunderous skies frequently suggested a divine or transcendent presence.

When he began taking pictures on the Western Front he decided that composite pictures were necessary for the subject. He found it impossible to picture trench warfare in a single exposure. He wrote later in the *Australian Photo-Review*:

None but those who have endeavoured can realise the insurmountable difficulties of portraying a modern battle by the camera. To include the event on a single negative, I have tried and tried, but the results are hopeless. Everything is on such a vast scale. Figures are scattered — the atmosphere is dense with haze and smoke — shells will not burst where required — yet the whole elements of a picture are there could they but be brought together and condensed.

Hurley was arguing that composite images could provide a truer image of what happened in modern battle. But C.E.W. Bean, the official Australian war correspondent, would not stand for any manipulation of negatives. He thought composite pictures were 'fakes'. Bean was a meticulous collector of facts, and was later appointed official war historian. He wanted to know exactly what happened on the front; Hurley wanted to present what he thought was a visually coherent image of the war. The argument between them came to the point where Hurley considered resigning, but he was finally allowed to make a small number of composite images. The effect of these was a visual condensation of the battlefield; the prints were crowded with heavy clouds, piercing rays of sunlight, exploding shells, diving aeroplanes, and soldiers going 'over the top'.

In *Once More On My Adventure*, Frank Legg and Toni Hurley assert that Bean was right. According to them, the composite pictures fail as realist representations; they mean little to soldiers who were at the Front. But Bean's criterion for judgment is not the only one: there are other ways of looking at these pictures. Following the critic Bernd Hüppauf, we can see
Hurley’s war photography as a photographer’s attempt to come to terms with material which posed a real problem. The problem was simple: how was it possible to photograph a modern war, where events are too dispersed to be seen from one field of vision?

Hurley tried various alternatives. He and his assistant often risked their lives roaming around the trenches looking for action, but they could not get the images Hurley required. Aerial photography, which Hurley was enthusiastic about, produced abstract images of roads, trenchlines and the broken surfaces of muddy battlefields. While these abstract images were useful for military purposes, for him they conveyed no sense of what was happening to soldiers on the ground. Composite images were necessary for that. Composite images created an artificial vantage point for the camera, an eventful perspective which rendered action simultaneously in the one imaginary place. Sometimes these events seem strangely juxtaposed. The combination of a scene of dead or injured soldiers among the ruined landscape of the battlefield with a beautifully glowing, cloudy dawn probably signified Hurley’s sense of fateful glory; now it appears inappropriate or at the least over-dramatised. But the awkwardness of the juxtaposition points to Hurley’s difficulty in reconciling on the one hand his romantic sense of pictorial beauty and his showmanship, and on the other his horror of the Western Front.

In late 1917, Hurley joined the Australian Mounted Divisions in Palestine. Away from Bean’s supervision, he was free to combine negatives as he liked. The Light Horse (as the Divisions were known) even helped him to stage photographs of events which he had missed, or which had never occurred. He took pictures for the record of the Light Horse in Jerusalem, even though they had not been involved in the capture of that city. Hurley observed in his diary that without the presence of the Light Horse the Jerusalem pictures would have had no military or public appeal.

The tension in Hurley’s Western Front pictures is between a romantic aesthetic and the new and terrible subject of modern mass destruction. This appears again in his 1918 pictures of Palestine. A picture of Gaza shows the Light Horse assembled in the ruined city. The soldiers, with their horses and their symmetry, seem to belong to another age; they look as though they are on the point of making a cavalry charge. The buildings behind them have not been captured so much as completely destroyed. Another picture shows two Australian troopers in the ruins of a mosque in Gaza, pointing at an aeroplane. The picture is beautifully composed, and there is almost an air of
gaiety about the soldiers. They seem excited by the plane rather than horrified at the devastation around them.
One of the most disturbing aspects of these war pictures is the emptiness of the city depicted. The inhabitants have disappeared; that is all we can intimate. When Hurley returned to Palestine in the 1940s, he was much more interested in taking pictures of the people there. His photographs from this period document a society which was to be broken up by the post-war dispensation. He had a new attitude to the Palestinians. In 1918 he had been a photographer in an invading army; in the forties he was working mainly for the British Government, which held a League of Nations mandate over the country. In the conflicts between the British, the Zionists, and the Palestinians, Hurley’s sympathies were firmly with the British. His understanding was simple: Palestine owed its progress to a benign administration. Beyond colonial loyalty, however, he was more sympathetic with the aspirations of Palestinians than with Zionism. The 1946 attack on the King David Hotel settled his view of the matter.

The Light Horse in Gaza, Palestine, 1918 (49.2 x 49.8cm)
Gaza, Palestine, 1918 (35 x 26.3cm)
HURLEY’S adventures in the Middle East, Papua and Antarctica were clearly bound up in imperial politics. But the imperial element of his work is not the whole story. Most of Hurley’s imperial adventures were also Australian ones: Mawson’s expeditions to Antarctica were organised in Australia; Hurley’s wartime work was mainly with Australian forces; and in Papua his quarrels were quarrels with an Australian colonial administration. So his mobility has to be seen as part of a national mobility, which took the expansive forms of colonisation in Papua, territorial annexation in Antarctica, and war in Europe and the Middle East.

Hurley’s travelling, then, cannot be understood as diminishing his sense of national identity. On the contrary, he seems to have always been intensely patriotic. He believed Australia was a land of progress, with a prosperous, secure future. He involved himself in the elaborate State anniversaries of the 1930s, making films for the South Australian centenary in 1936 and for the 150th anniversary of Captain Arthur Phillip’s landing in 1938. The 1938 film, *A Nation is Built*, proclaimed his confidence:

A climate without peer, fabulous natural resources, unsurpassed scenery and limitless sporting facilities combine to make Australia the natural setting for the new Anglo-Saxon Empire under the Southern Cross.

The film celebrated white settlement and elaborated on a national destiny provided by God. ‘The bounty of the earth impels us to look to the good will in the heavens and to say “We thank Thee.”’ Hurley produced a very large body of work about Australia: documentaries, feature film cinematography, numerous books, calendars and postcards. His *Camera Study* books, which he began on his return from the Middle East in 1946, took up the theme again. A picture in *Australia: A Camera Study* showed ‘Strawberry time on a “New Australian” settler’s farm near Brisbane. Originally from Greece, the owner has worked hard and considers Australia the best country in the world’.
The *Camera Study* books, like the earlier films, concentrated on two aspects of Australia: its natural beauty and its industrial productivity. Hurley’s aesthetic was perfectly suited to the task. Wheat fields, waterfalls and beaches all looked good in bright sunshine, and a picturesque sky completed them. There was very little of the tension between composition and subject matter that appeared in his wartime photography. Good will was represented in the heavens; energetic activity on the ground. There were certain images that Hurley used to express this harmonious relationship again and again: the mass of sheep ambling through trees was one favourite scene, as was the wheat harvest in a wide, bright, shallow valley. The countenance divine shone forth upon those clouded hills.

*The Warrumbungle Mountains, New South Wales, c. 1950 (38.1 x 50.2cm). Hurley used this picture in Australia: A Camera Study (1955) to illustrate ‘The Wool Industry’.*
Further Reading

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