John Flynn's Double Vision

Historian Rob Linn describes an in-depth study of the Australian Inland Mission and the AIM photographs held in the National Library's collections.

For two days we explored a seemingly never-ending series of images that opened up a vanished world. The earliest snaps captured, on coloured lantern slides, scenes of the Otway Ranges and the Snowy region in Victoria, remote from urban civilisation and peopled by settlers whose daily task was clearing the dense forests and scratching a living from the soil. These photographs included exceptional studies of people at life and work.

Before he reached the age of 26, the photographer, John Flynn—who became known as Flynn of the Inland—had delighted in learning about photography. Professionally trained, he spent most of his meagre earnings as a teacher and student pastor with the Presbyterian Church on the equipment that enabled him to take and develop the photographic plates that resulted in the images referred to above. The teacher-photographer has made the past come alive for us.

Flynn had the gift of being able to see beneath the superficial, to tease out the subject of his photograph. He had an eye for the essential composition of a shot. His gaze caught everything that surrounded him—both people and land. Densely forested hills fall into the foaming, furious waters of the Snowy River. Fifteen family members, from the elderly to babes-in-arms, stare intently at the camera lens outside their slab, bark-roofed hut—the features of the ancient ones as gnarled as the timber of their dwelling. Toorloo Bay, Lake Tyers is clothed in reflective majesty: the trees, pink-tinged sky, and boat pulled along by two men are mirrored in the deep green waters. A bearded trapper, head topped by his best hat, sits on a felled eucalypt outside his tent, surrounded by his tools of trade—axes, guns, skinning equipment. There is the rough lean-to, and his horse, carrying the hides of the animals he has slaughtered for their fur. Stark, fire-swept trees, blackened stalks in the midst of a crisped wasteland, stand erect and tower over the charred carcasses of cattle. In the midst of another forest, a team of axemen trim back the scrub as preparation for clearance. Two men, tin enamel mugs gripped in their teeth, gently pour the rarest of all outback treasures, water, over their hands as they wash.

All these and many other photographs capture the essence of an age in Australia's past and are evidence of Flynn's delight with the people he encountered and the world that surrounded them. His fascination for these things and his photography continued after he joined the Smith of Dunesk Mission, based at Beltana, South Australia in 1911 and began the outback work for which he is so widely appreciated.

Over the ensuing decades, until his death on 5 May 1951, Flynn and his colleagues chronicled remote and regional Australia through their work and collected the outstanding shots of other photographers. They preserved for future generations the characters of the Australian Outback and the land they battled.

These magnificent images, taken and acquired by the Reverend John Flynn.
Flynn, are part of the Australian Inland Mission (AIM) Collection in the National Library. Assembled by Flynn and later by his successor at the AIM, Reverend Fred McKay, the pictorial works number some 4466 items. These include gelatin silver photographs, glass slides—many of which are hand-coloured and were used by Flynn in his public lectures—glass negatives and nitrate negatives.

Spanning four decades, beginning with Flynn’s earliest work in the Otways, Gippsland and the Snowy from 1903 to 1907, the collection underscores Flynn’s obsession with photography.

There was a second and deeper reason for his passion. Begun in 1912 by the Presbyterian Church, the AIM’s primary role was to care for the people who lived in the isolated regions of Western Australia, South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland. Flynn wrote that these folk needed ‘a sense of security’ if the proper development of the Outback was to occur and the nation built for the future. His and Australia’s hopes, he claimed in an early edition of his Inlander magazine, were with these people on the frontier:

We claim that man as ‘Our Friend,’ and wish him all his brothers and sisters in the Outer Outback. Surely, if any man deserves our friendship the Inlander more than deserves our very best. This man, who silently makes his way where few have trodden; who can find home and comfort with the dry, sandy bed of a lonely inland ‘river’ beneath him—and a few tiny curls of blue smoke above; whom petty irritations and crushing losses alike can only make more silent; who merely gets more square in the jaw, now hidden beneath a sturdy beard, as he sweeps away each new difficulty; who looks on every journey as ‘a very favourable trip’, granted the one condition that he get there; who ranks for initiative, and resource, and grit, and kindness, with the best of mankind the world over; without whose fullest contribution Australia can never, never be the Power that God intends she should be.

We wish to be reckoned by this man among his friends.

To provide a ‘mantle of safety’ for these people of the Outback, Flynn planned a series of travelling patrol ministries, nursing hostels and even a library distribution network. Supported by philanthropists and thousands of urban and rural Australians, the AIM expanded its work in 1928 to include the Aerial Medical Services—fore-runner of the Royal Flying Doctor Service. To achieve his hopes for the AIM, and to raise funds to further the work, Flynn believed that he needed to spread information about the remote regions of Australia, the best of mankind the world over; without whose fullest contribution Australia can never, never be the Power that God intends she should be.
of Australia and its people. His publications and public lectures always used photographs and illustrations to amplify his argument. Photographs were his persuaders, a means of evoking emotion and sentiment. His subjects were as varied as the country he traversed: children and families; forest labourers; workers in packing sheds; camel trains; trappers and hunters.

In many ways his images are the soul of the bush. More than a promotional tool, the collection has preserved the heritage of regional and remote areas. Because he copied the photographs of other enthusiasts, as well as taking his own, Flynn has maintained a rich and varied view of the land and its people.

Linda Groom, Pictures Librarian at the Library, speaks highly of the AIM Collection. 'The collection,' she notes, 'is particularly useful. It captures rural and regional Australia, is cohesive, large and covers a long time period. It has breadth as well as depth and a wide range of subject themes.' Groom enthuses about the way in which the collection captures the working and living conditions of earlier ages; technology, such as pedal radios and aircraft, is particularly well represented. She believes that the list of researchers and publishers who use the collection will grow as it gains the attention it deserves.

Groom is also enthusiastic about a Library project that, with digital technology, has captured the images that Flynn and his compatriots so valued, making them available to more Australians. She perceives that the collection's usefulness has in the past been lessened by what she terms 'barriers to access'. Being made up largely of negative material and housed in a cold store, the collection was for years difficult to view. Digital images do away with these barriers and the resulting ease of access will provide more researchers with the opportunity to view them.

One of those agencies that has used the AIM Collection is Frontier Services, the Uniting Church’s successor to the AIM. David Sullivan of Frontier Services speaks of Flynn’s skill as a photographer and ‘his eye for telling a story’. The collection, says Sullivan, ‘reminds us of a very powerful beginning that we had as an organisation. It takes us right back to the essence of what we do and why we serve and provides a clear understanding of where it was we came from.’ Given that Frontier Services provides assistance to the people who live and work in regional and remote Australia—people whose existence is in the 85 per cent of the land mass outside the cities—its use of the collection is testimony to its enduring qualities; qualities now further enhanced by the digitisation project.

The vanished world of Australia that opened when Flynn’s magnificent images came to light is accessible as never before. The AIM Collection brings to life the people and past of rural and remote communities.

Rob Linn is a professional historian from the Adelaide Hills in South Australia who conducts interviews regularly for the National Library’s Oral History Collection. His book about John Flynn’s photography and the work of Frontier Services, Shifting Sands to Solid Rock: Ninety Years of Frontier Services, ISBN 0 95854548 0, is available from the National Library of Australia Bookshop.