During the half-century from the 1890s to the 1940s, the theme of the 'bush' emerged as a formative element in a new Australian identity. Assumptions about the Central Australian frontier and its people – black and white – then hardened into stereotypes that still affect our perceptions of this country.

The photographs in this book, from the rich collections of the South Australian Museum, take us behind those stereotypes, to the reality of the frontier itself. The photographers were seven remarkable men whose vocations took them into the heart of Central Australia, long before tourism and colour photography transformed our view of the outback.
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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Boomerang: Behind an Australian Icon

Ochre and Rust: Artefacts and Encounters on Australian Frontiers

Art and Land: Aboriginal Sculptures of the Lake Eyre Region
    with Peter Sutton

Australia’s Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland
    with Anna Kenny
IMAGES OF THE INTERIOR

SEVEN CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN PHOTOGRAPHERS

PHILIP JONES
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The 84 images in this book document some of the first European impressions of Central Australia’s landscape and society during the half-century from the 1890s to the 1940s. It was early in this period that the theme of the ‘bush’ emerged as a formative element in a new Australian identity. Assumptions about the Centralian frontier and its people – black and white – then hardened into stereotypes which still affect our perceptions of this country.

Seven photographers are represented here, each with a unique perspective. None of these men was a professional photographer; each was drawn to Central Australia for different reasons, and used photography to advance his own distinctive project. A dozen images from each photographer take us into these Centralian worlds.

Frank Gillen was posted to the Centre as a telegraph operator, Samuel White went to gather natural history specimens. George Aiston worked for decades as a mounted police trooper before taking up a remote general store; the physical anthropologist Cecil Hackett documented the health of desert Aborigines; itinerant missionary Ernest Kramer recorded his evangelical encounters. Doctor–adventurer William Walker photographed the ‘inner continent’ for his illustrated lectures, while Rex Battarbee’s camera framed and composed many of the landscapes that appear in his watercolour paintings. Although their photography was rarely an end in itself, these men produced striking and memorable images.

The constraints of early photographic equipment, particularly in terms of lenses which suited closer subjects more than distant horizons, obliged these photographers to work with the middle distance and the closer foreground, where portraiture emerged as a key preoccupation. In this early period, before waves of camera-wielding tourists entered the Centre after the Second World War, Aboriginal people were, as often as not, willing to engage with photographers as subjects for these studies. The frank interest and mutual curiosity evident in these portraits suggests that ‘indigenous resistance to the colonial gaze’ is a more recent academic construct, reflecting the justifiable suspicion of those more intrusive and impersonal forms of photography which followed the advent of mass tourism. It is fair to say that none of the Aboriginal portraits in this book were taken lightly; the photographers were awake to the exact circumstances of their transaction – and in many cases they recorded these circumstances in their journals or notebooks.

Previous surveys of archival Australian photography have tended to concentrate on the work of city-based photographers, partly because their work entered the public
record through exhibition or publication. In fact, most of Australia’s great historic photographers – including J.W. Lindt, Charles Kerry, Henry King, Harold Cazneaux and Frederick Joyner – were city photographers, whose encounters with the bush were short and relatively superficial. While none of the photographers represented in this book was born in the bush, or grew up there as children, each came to know it intimately. This quality is apparent in their work. Moreover, their photographs were hard won, taken opportunistically when the pressure of other tasks had eased, preserved against the odds through dust storms and floods, and brought overland by camel-back. In several cases, such as many of the negatives taken by Aiston, Kramer and White, for example, many decades passed in attics or sheds before these images found a safer archival home.

The period from the 1890s to the 1940s was a distinctive era in the history of photography. Photographic processes were transformed, especially through the availability of pocket Kodak cameras during the late 1890s. Photographers gained new access to landscapes and subjects which had previously been remote and inaccessible. The decision as to how to frame and compose these fresh photographic scenes and subjects was influenced strongly by the artistic movement of pictorialism, with its softened, almost wistful effects. Later, as lenses improved, the sharper styles of documentary photography and the cinema newsreel emerged, paving the way for an emerging modernist style. These developments largely passed unnoticed in Central Australia, although the Pictorialist influence certainly affected George Aiston’s early landscape work, and both Cecil Hackett and W.D. Walker adopted a rapid-fire documentary style during their expeditions.

Although Richard Daintree had made photographs successfully in outback Queensland as early as the 1860s, it was not until the early 1890s that photography began to be used in Central Australia effectively. By that time descriptions of the Centre and events occurring there had been routinely transmitted by telegraph for two decades. Photography was a late arrival and seems to have been little noticed, overshadowed by the Overland Telegraph (1872), the steam railway advancing northward from Port Augusta to Oodnadatta and finally to Alice Springs (1929), and the advent of pedal wireless communication between outback communities during the 1920s. Motor vehicles began to supplant the horse and buggy, and gradually fewer Afghan camel strings were seen on outback tracks, as motorised trucks took over. While all the photographers in this book documented those historic advances and displacements, Aiston and Walker were the only ones to successfully present their images to a broader public. Their images of the interior had to compete for magazine and newspaper space with the dominant Pictorialist images of a wooded, temperate Australia, and it is worth remembering that the harsher outback remained a forbidding
and problematic subject until the late 1920s, when the paintings of Hans Heysen successfully proposed it as a new ‘sublime’ landscape, founded in ochre shades.

Until then, and despite efforts of explorers, popular writers and journalists to evoke its vibrant palette, half a century of photography had rendered the interior as a largely black and white landscape for metropolitan Australians. Unlike the photography of south-eastern Australia, which sprang to living colour in the imagination of its inhabitants through their own daily experience of those landscapes, Central Australian scenes remained fixed in black and white. The colours of the inland, on which an entire tourism industry is based today, were simply not visible.

The last three images in this book tell the story of that historic shift, as Australians began to perceive the Centre as a colour-drenched landscape. The artist and photographer Rex Battarbee provided the catalyst for that shift. His story is all the more extraordinary for the role he played in introducing the watercolour palette to Albert Namatjira, the Arrernte artist. Travelling to Central Australia during the early 1930s, he was so impressed by the colour and light, the sculptural forms of white-trunked eucalypts and the structures of gorges and rocky outcrops, that he became a permanent resident. A decade later, Battarbee pioneered the use of colour photography in the Centre, partly to justify his choice of colour in his own watercolour paintings, unprecedented in their vibrant hues.

Battarbee’s photographic innovation marked the beginning of a new phase in imagery of the interior – the Kodachrome phase – during which his personal fascination with the colours and landmark sites of Central Australia became transmitted from coast to coast, integrated within an emerging nationalism oriented toward those sites as much as the coastal seaboard. The Kodachrome phase also lasted approximately half a century, supplanted in turn by a new, digital phase of auto-focus, steady-shot, fool-proof photography, hardly comprehensible to the Gillens and Aistons of an earlier age.

The images in this book offer a reminder of the distance travelled by photography itself, but also of the changes undergone by its subjects. These early photographers in this book trod lightly in Central Australia, but not casually. They worked hard enough to gain single images of remarkable places, and to preserve them as documents. They convinced Aboriginal people to enter those images, sometimes in the interests of science, sometimes to enhance the sense of the picturesque, but often also, as Samuel Albert White put it, as the ‘rightful owners of the soil’.
Francis Gillen first entered Central Australia in 1875 as a young telegraph operator working on the newly built Overland Telegraph Line, strung between poles across 3000 kilometres of deserts, valleys and plains from Adelaide to Port Darwin. The Line had been completed just three years earlier, providing the first telegraph communication between Australia and the rest of the world.

As Gillen put it in his youthful account of his 1500-kilometre journey from Adelaide to Alice Springs, undertaken by horse and wagon in the company of fellow telegraph officers, his motivation for ‘pressing outward through the boundaries of Civilization & Settlement’ was the opportunity to save money, to make ‘a start in the world.’ At the age of twenty Gillen had already worked for the Postal and Telegraph Department for eight years, having been appointed as a postal messenger in his home town of Clare as a twelve-year-old. Despite a rudimentary formal education, he was a voracious reader and wrote engagingly; this first expedition journal is amusingly Dickensian in style. He described his frontier encounters with refreshing candour and curiosity, tinging the account with an irreverent and oppositional Irish humour. The diary records the human qualities and foibles of all individuals he encountered, white or black. It includes a short list of Aboriginal people encountered north of the Peake Telegraph Station, and two word lists. One of these represents the first recorded vocabulary of the Lower Arrernte language.

Twenty-five years after his arrival in Central Australia, and despite investing large portions of his salary in horse racing, lotteries and ill-starred mining ventures, Gillen had barely made a ‘start in the world.’ But he had enriched himself in other ways. In 1880, following his initial posting to Alice Springs Telegraph Station, where he came to know the Arrernte people of the MacDonnell Ranges, Gillen was transferred 150...
Gillen took this photograph of a ‘typical’ Arrernte family in camp with their tools and utensils in June 1897, near the Alice Springs Telegraph Station. It has become a defining image of traditional Aboriginal life in Central Australia, but the scene was carefully composed for inclusion in the classic publication *Native Tribes in Central Australia* (1899), written by Gillen and Baldwin Spencer. The man is adzing a spear while his two wives grind seed, and their children watch and learn. The axe, dishes, grinding stones, spears, spear-thrower, shield and boomerangs had comprised the full kit of Arrernte subsistence technology, but were already supplanted by European artefacts.
Captain Samuel Albert White (1870–1954)

ORNITHOLOGIST AND CONSERVATIONIST

It is hardly surprising that Samuel Albert White became an ornithologist. He was born on 20 December 1870, a few days before his father set off on his fifth major bird-collecting expedition. The young Samuel Albert sighted his father’s bird specimens more often than the man himself. Samuel White senior had turned a boyhood hobby into a lifelong obsession, just as his son would do. As children during the 1840s, he and his brother William had built a secret museum of birds and other specimens in a tree trunk on the Reedbeds family property at Fulham, close to the coastal swamps of Adelaide’s River Torrens. With his property to support him, Samuel White mounted a series of more than twenty bird-collecting expeditions from 1862 until his death in 1880. These expeditions took him to the Murray Mallee, Kangaroo Island, and as far afield as northern Queensland and the Aru Islands, near Papua. Like other Australian natural scientists of his day, Samuel White looked to Britain for authoritative guidance. His most prized discoveries were sent to the British ‘bird man’, John Gould, who wrote of the South Australian ornithologist: ‘I have reason to believe that no one of my many correspondents in Australia is more keenly alive to the interests which attach to our favourite branch of science, ornithology.’

Nevertheless, Samuel White was aware of the expanding role of colonial science and local institutions. When he died in 1880, the pick of his collection of several thousand bird specimens was lodged in the South Australian Institute Museum, to be stored there until his son reached adulthood. Samuel Albert White claimed these 300 specimens in 1891, just before his 21st birthday. They became the core of his remarkable collection of 4000 specimens, gathered carefully during the next 30 years.
This photograph was taken by Samuel Albert White’s wife, Ethel, also an accomplished naturalist. It shows White with his bird gun, on the lookout for specimens in the Gawler Ranges, 1912.
George Aiston
(1879–1943)

POLICE TROOPER, STOREKEEPER AND ETHNOGRAPHER

As a boy George Aiston inherited his grandfather’s collection of swords, and this may have been enough to set him on his life’s course as a soldier, outback policeman and collector. Like Francis Gillen, Aiston had the minimum of formal education, leaving school at the age of eleven – probably to work in his father’s wood yard in the Adelaide suburb of Norwood. George’s mother had died when he was an infant, and he did not get on well with his step-mother. He learned to shoot, and by the age of eighteen had joined Adelaide’s Permanent Artillery. With this experience he volunteered as a gunner for the First South Australian Contingent, comprising five officers and 121 men, which left for the Boer War in November 1899. Another Boer War veteran discussed in this book, Samuel Albert White, collected ornithological and other natural history specimens while in South Africa. George Aiston collected weapons and battlefield curios, sending these (in one of the chocolate boxes presented to troops by Queen Victoria) home to his father, who saw that they were displayed to a curious public at Adelaide’s Pantheon Theatre.

Returning unscathed in 1901, Aiston immediately joined the South Australian Mounted Police, and was posted to several country localities. At Port Germein in the Mid North he had close dealings with Aboriginal people for the first time. Later, he recalled that his encounters with native peoples in South Africa provoked his curiosity as to whether Aboriginal people ‘had any customs in common with the African negro’. At Tumby Bay and Tarcoola on South Australia’s remote west coast, Aiston became known to Aboriginal people as a police trooper who prided himself on not carrying a gun. He combined a straightforward manner with an enquiring mind, and soon developed a particular
Reflections in the spring-fed lagoon at Mungeranie, on the Birdsville Track. Aiston won an international photography prize with this 1912 photograph of his wife Mabel standing by the water’s edge in the evening shadows.
Of the seven inland photographers discussed in this book, Ernest Kramer was the most intrepid and the most idealistic. He spent twenty years in Central Australia before the mighty ordeal he had undertaken broke his health at the age of 45. The first decade was spent mounting a series of evangelical expeditions into northern South Australia with a caravan pulled by donkeys, gradually extending his range to Central Australia. For the second decade he was based in Alice Springs with his wife and young family, but periodically set off on even more ambitious expeditions to all points of the compass, using a team of camels and Aboriginal companions to take medical supplies and the Gospel to isolated Aboriginal groups. In Alice Springs itself, Kramer built the town’s first church and its first ‘old folks home’ for Aboriginal people. He and his wife Euphemia provided school lessons and taught craft skills to the ‘half-caste’ children of the ‘Bungalow’ home run by Mrs Ida Standley.

This remarkable career began when Kramer had been in Australia for just three years, having arrived in Adelaide during 1909. He had emigrated from his native Switzerland largely for health reasons, but partly also in response to the spiritual tumult which would push him towards evangelism. His father kept a public house in Basel. Ernest was youngest of nine children and had suffered very poor health as a child. After the death of his devoutly Christian mother he was sent at the age of fourteen to study milling engineering in Germany, but soon became exposed to the dissolute side of student life. His mental and physical health deteriorated to the point where a doctor prescribed a rest cure in the mountains, leading to a chance meeting with an Australian ‘herbal practitioner’. Inspired by the man’s ‘glowing account’ of Australia, Ernest decided to emigrate.1
An Aboriginal station hand in northern South Australia, 1930s. Men such as these had grown up in full possession of their tribal lands, but saw European pastoralists take over their waterholes and introduce a way of life that left Aboriginal people on the fringe of the European economy. This man probably received his wages in tobacco and cast-off clothing.
Cecil Hackett came from a line of horticulturalists and nurserymen who had supplied Adelaide’s farms and gardens with plants and seeds since the early 1850s. His father Richard was a partner in the Marryatville nursery and seed business, trading as E. & W. Hackett, and this is where Cecil was born on 25 April 1905. Perhaps Cecil’s straightforward nature and equanimity – if not his focused interest in biology and science – can be traced to the pleasant surroundings in which he spent his childhood. An historian described the nursery in these terms:

If trees could speak, many a tall wide spreading one might claim to have started life at the Marryatville Nursery, so long a household word with flower lovers. To the Hackett family that garden was more than a mere business concern, it was an absorbing hobby, and the magic of plant growth was a life study of never-failing interest. Bulbs and plants arriving from overseas were coaxed carefully through the upsetting reversal of habits involved in a trip to the antipodes.1

The nursery business was profitable enough for Cecil to attend Queen’s School in North Adelaide, known for its high academic standards and for providing a broad, practical education. This privately owned boys’ school produced seven Rhodes Scholars in its short history and there is little doubt that Cecil’s aspirations broadened quickly during his time there. At this time Queen’s School served partly as a preparatory school for St Peter’s College and he completed his final years of schooling there, winning a place at the University of Adelaide medical school in 1922.

For many years students and academics associated with the Adelaide medical school had also shared an interest in physical anthropology, centred on Australian Aboriginal people. This trend had been started by the medical school’s co-founders,
The makeshift kitchen at a bushman’s camp at Ernabella in the Musgrave Ranges, north-west South Australia, 1933. The metal billycan is boiling for tea; the standing figure – expedition guide and dingo-scalp trader, Alan Brumby – has been making bread with flour.
It is fair to say that until Dr William Delano Walker’s inland tour during 1928–1929, no individual photographer had taken more than a few hundred images of Central Australia. Within eighteen months Walker took more than 10,000 documented photographs, consisting of 8 x 6 cm negatives and prints, with his small ‘Vest pocket Kodak’ camera. This extraordinary archive, preserved intact with the detailed diaries of the expedition kept by his wife Mollie and himself, provides a unique, almost encyclopaedic survey of life in Central Australia at the height of one of the twentieth century’s most savage droughts. What drove Walker to make this record?

A ready answer lies in Walker’s personal background. An only child, born on 30 October 1897 at Port Pirie on South Australia’s Spencer Gulf, William lost both of his parents before his eighth birthday.1 Orphaned and without the key family figures to shape his identity, he ‘quickly became a little larrikin, smoking and swearing … yet I liked school and never played the wag.’2 After failing a year of primary school he fell under the firm influence of his aunt at Port Elliot, and began to advance rapidly, winning a scholarship to study and board at St Peter’s College. By the age of fourteen, diarising, record-keeping, and marking his key milestones had become absorbing pastimes. So had photography: Walker later recalled that in his second year of high school, ‘I did not overwork myself but put much time into photography’.3 A year later he had tied for his form prize with Howard Florey, the future discoverer of penicillin’s curative properties. In the same year Walker won the prize of five pounds and five shillings, for an essay competition on the subject of ‘Australian Natives’ set by Adelaide surgeon Robert Pulleine (later a founding-member of the University of Adelaide’s Board for Anthropological Research).
Bill Walker’s Model T Ford, in the salt bush plains of northern South Australia, 1927. Walker and his wife Mollie spent eighteen months travelling in this vehicle through Central Australia, covering 10,000 kilometres and taking more than 3000 photographs. The vehicle was loaded with camping gear, rations, rifles, ammunition, cameras, spare axles, pistons, water and spare petrol.
W.D. Walker spoke of Australia as comprising an ‘inner continent’ and an ‘outer
continent’. For many Australians the notion of the ‘interior’ implied a hidden realm,
separated from the exterior by a curtain which had once been penetrated only by
explorers. Travellers and photographers had assumed that role since the 1890s, but
although their descriptions were often vivid, the images they brought back with them,
and published in books and newspapers, were invariably black and white, or sepia at
best. Although those Australians who considered the matter well understood that the
Centre was a colourful place – strikingly different from the temperate hues of south-
eastern Australia, for example – it remained an imagined colour landscape until the late
1940s. Of all the photographers working in the period from the 1890s to the 1930s,
only one was able to reveal the interior in its true colours. That man was Rex Battarbee.

Reginald (Rex) Ernest Battarbee seemed to dedicate his life to the pursuit of vivid
colour. The youngest of five children, he was born in 1893 to dairy farmer parents in
the coastal Victorian town of Warnambool.¹ His sister Florinda, eleven years older, had
received art lessons from Walter Withers and ‘guided the cultural life of the district’.²
She taught Rex the basics of drawing and colour theory. He was probably destined
for life as a farmer, were it not for the fact that he was severely wounded in the First
World War. Having enlisted in January 1916, he embarked with the 58th Infantry
Battalion in October of that year and was soon fighting on the Western Front. There
he sustained serious injuries and in May 1917 was badly gassed during the second
battle for Bullecourt.³ Left for dead on the battlefield, he barely survived and spent
lengthy periods in hospital in France and England before being repatriated to Australia
in 1920. With his left hand rendered useless, farming was out of the question and Rex
turned to art. Cyril Leyshon White’s Commercial Art School opened in Melbourne

Rex Battarbee painting on his rooftop studio, Alice Springs, 1950s. Gayle Quarmby
Study of a gum tree, with two Arrernte men, probably photographed by Rex Battarbee during his 1934 painting trip in the MacDonnell Ranges. During the subsequent decade Battarbee’s Arrernte assistants became accomplished watercolour artists in their own right. Here they are gently subverting the photograph that Battarbee may have intended as a study for his own landscape painting.