

**review of anne maxwell and
lucy van, *australian women's
historical photography: other
times, other views* (anthem,
2024)**

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Australian Women's Historical Photography: Other Times, Other Views by Anne Maxwell and Lucy Van is an important and profoundly moving book where photographs are at the very heart of its scholarship. Each image is discussed, analysed and looked at with great care, honesty and integrity. It drives home why photography and scholarship on photography can have such far-reaching consequences to our understanding of history.

There is a vexing issue for anyone interested in Australia's cultural history and for those of us that adore the medium of photography and that is, historical photography struggles in Australia. Specialist photography curators are disappearing from

our national museums. Dedicated galleries are rare and the conservation of photography in Australia is bundled-up with paper conservation. Paper is just one part of the photographic story whose stuff is a complex mix of silver, glass, tin, gelatin, celluloid and chemistry. Without a specialist domain valuable photographic material remains vulnerable.

The first photographs ever made astonished the public with their apparent ability to freeze time. This characteristic is unique to photography and sets it apart from other ways of picture making. As stated in Maxwell and Van's book: "The presence inscribed in photographs offers a visceral sense of the past."¹ Perhaps this is why historical photography has struggled in Australia—in the quest for modernity we have failed to address the past and at worst obliterated it from memory. It is also true from the outset; from the very moment of its invention photography struggled to be defined. Critics such as Charles Baudelaire considered photography a servant to the sciences and the arts: "Let it [photography] rescue from oblivion those tumbling ruins..."² In Baudelaire's view, photography was to be "thanked and applauded" only when it remained in the world of documentation, but if it were to cross into the realm of art it had become "art's most mortal enemy".³ Of course he was proved wrong, and by the late nineteenth-century, photography was considered an art form, flourishing in artistic movements such as pictorialism, surrealism and in the new objectivism. German born Hedda Morrison was a proponent of new objectivism, and her work (featured in chapter two) draws us into the European avant-garde with her sharply focused close-ups and birds-eye views. Acceptance into artistic circles created its own issues and divisions. Were photographers amateur or professional? Was the work defined as commerce or art?

Maxwell and Van's *Other Times, Other Views* manages to navigate this terrain adroitly and without falter. In its examination of Australia's late colonial era, it *remembers our forgetting* and draws attention to the deeply distressing events in our history as well as some of the more progressive experiences from that time. Maxwell and Van's work also cuts through the chatter and clutter looking at

photography in all its magnificent forms: Realist, documentary, artistic, amateur and commercial. In doing so, the book gives a voice to the many important women photographers neglected and overlooked in the history of Australian photography.

“Just gold”⁴ as her daughter, Dallas Phillips, so beautifully described them, are the precious negatives of Mavis Phillips (née Walley), one of the earliest known Indigenous Australian photographers. The book gives voice to the Australian women who travelled and made photographs abroad—Sarah Chinnery and Hedda Morrison, amateurs Doris McKellar and Ada Armytage, and the studio work of May and Mina Moore. In the spirit of the National Gallery of Australia’s “Know My Name” initiative⁵ the women in this book have claimed their place in the cultural life of this country.

Meticulously researched, it writes of seven women across three chapters each with a distinctive pairing that is both astute and revealing in their comparisons and contrasts. For instance, the handheld ‘home-front’ photos by McKellar contrast with the formal studio portraits of the Moore sisters with their luscious Rembrandt lighting. The Moore sisters were successful businesswomen photographing celebrities from Sydney and Melbourne’s theatre scene. During the war, the sisters turned their attention to the soldiers who would come to their studios requesting formal portraits to give to their loved ones—their uncertain future captured in gelatin and silver. Meanwhile, University student McKellar, using a Kodak 3A folding pocket camera, made spontaneous images of friends, family, and university life that included many portraits of young men in uniform before embarkation. These are documents of the Great War produced in vastly different ways but both profoundly affecting in their results.

The contrasts are more profound when looking at the photographs by Armytage and Phillips—a disparity born of colonisation. We have a document of a wealthy, white settler family, the Armytages, alongside the family photos made by Phillips of the Ballardong Noongar community of Western Australia. A pastoralist’s daughter, Armytage had wealth, privilege and time to pursue photography—a craze that

pre-occupied the Victorian era. Using glass dry plates and a bellows style camera, her interest in the medium commenced around 1880. Her subjects included a heady mix of tableau vivants depicting bushrangers and murderers to the refined existence of life on the grounds of Como House in Toorak, Melbourne. A striking image of a stagecoach with Armytage's cast shadow reveals the photographer in action—her bustled silhouette with camera, dark cloth and tripod. These are images of the Victorian squattocracy of southeast Australia but as Maxwell and Van assert: “in their genteel, aspirational Britishness, Armytage's photographs show a family forgetting Aboriginal people.”⁶

Almost a generation later and on the other side of the continent, the family photographs by Mavis Phillips (née Walley), a descendant of the First Peoples of the south-west Australia, tell a vastly different story. For 45 years Phillips's daughter Dallas carefully safeguarded a tin of negatives that once belonged to her mother Mavis. The tin contained over three hundred images of mainly portraits and the natural environment. Today, the digitised scans of Phillip's work are held in the State Library of Western Australia. The images are captioned with the dates 1900 to 1950—a time of racial stratification and economic inequality. How Phillips came to photography remains unknown. As noted by the authors: “[I]t was rare for an Aboriginal person to own a camera, let alone have the time and resources to take pictures and develop the film.”⁷ Considering the demands of assimilation and the trauma of dislocation brought about by the Native Welfare Act, this important collection of photographs prioritises the indigenous voice. There is joy in these photographs and the re-occurring motifs show that Phillips “used her camera not only to capture and preserve family memories but also as a tool for creative expression and visual pleasure.”⁸

The two remaining women discussed in the publication worked outside of Australia. In chapter two we are introduced to Sarah Chinnery who photographed in New Guinea and Hedda Morrison who worked in China and Malaysia. Both women lived for a significant period of time in their respective locations which sparked a deep interest in the peoples and cultures they experienced. Chinnery,

in her realist style, documented the enormous changes that were taking place in Rabaul, while Morrison captured pre-revolutionary China, and later the Sarawak people and what remained of their traditional culture. As Maxwell and Van observe:

Both women's photography involved a complex intersection of poetics, salvage and science, all wrapped up in a powerful wave of nostalgia for that bygone moment when, armed with nothing but a camera both were able to lose themselves in the pleasure that came from making objects of lasting value to themselves, the people that they photographed and the historical record.⁹

The authors of *Other Times, Other Views* recognise the physicality of the photographic medium as a lasting object. They also recognise the difficulties of picture making. No matter Eastman Kodak's 1888 slogan, "You Press the Button, We Do the Rest", photography back then was a complex mix of alchemy and timing that required skill and judgement. This notion of Chinnery and Morrison losing themselves in the pleasure of picture-making and the enduring value of their work can be applied to all the women featured in this important book.

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NOTES

1. Anne Maxwell and Lucy Van, *Australian Women's Historical Photography: Other Times, Other Views*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2024, 41.
2. Baudelaire's art review of the National Academy's Salon of 1859 was first published in the *Révue Française*, June 10-July 20, Paris, 1859. This quotation is taken from Baudelaire's *The Mirror of Art*. Ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press, 1955, 232.
3. Baudelaire, *Mirror*, 232.
4. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 94.
5. National Gallery of Australia, "Know My Name," accessed 30 September 2024, <https://nga.gov.au/know-my-name/#about>.
6. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 88.
7. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 92.
8. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 102.
9. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 66.