

# PICTURE STORY

**Axel Poignant, photographer**

**The Formative Years 1929-1942**

**By Roslyn Poignant**

**The Cross Art Projects, Sydney, February 2011**

In September 1941 Axel Poignant and Hal Missingham held a joint exhibition of fifty photographs each and gave a series of conversational lectures at Perth's Newspaper House. The title of lecture 4 reads like a manifesto for Poignant's photographic practice.

"Your personality expressed through your camera: Your personal reactions to life and nature can be stated in terms of the camera".



*Axel Poignant-Hal Missingham, Exhibition of Photographs, 1941. Catalogue with a short forward 'New Developments in Photography', by Alec King. Axel Poignant, Self-portrait with new Leica III, Perth 1934; Self-portrait with first movie camera, Perth, 1933-34.*

In his studio work in the thirties, mainly as a portraitist, the client was king. When he escaped, however, his use of the camera as a recorder of life and nature was an expression of his attitudes, interests and personality. Although such pictures could never earn him a living, these were the memorable images from which he selected the 1941 show.

On route to Australia in 1926 Axel Poignant (1906-86) purchased a second-hand camera from a fellow passenger and wrote to his parents that he would make a special 'picture story' of his journey. But the first two years were tough. After a brief agricultural training course for young migrants at Scheyville near Windsor in NSW he worked as a rural labourer until, ill with hepatitis and penniless, he retreated to Sydney. There, in 1928, the theosophists rescued him when he fainted from hunger at one of their meetings. From family letters it is evident that the Arundales, both George, the leader of the theosophical movement in Australia, and his wife Rukmini, groomed him as a theosophical acolyte and recognised Axel's photographic talent.

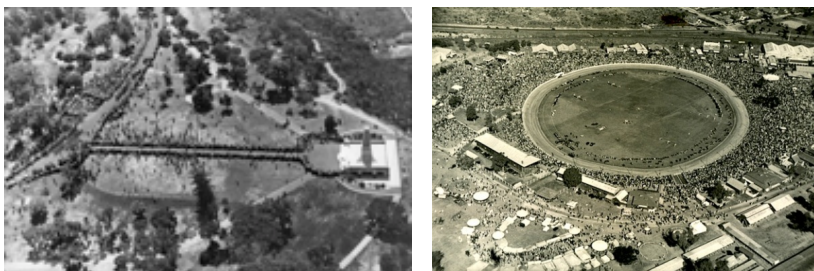
He lived at The Manor, the society's community house in Mosman and was advanced a loan for the purchase of the ¼ pl. Soho reflex camera used for his first commissions.

During Easter 1930 Axel married a young fellow resident at The Manor, Sandra Chase from Perth — with the encouragement and support of her mother, Muriel Chase, and to the shocked dismay of his distant parents. As well as being a theosophist, Muriel, a journalist for *The West Australian*, championed women's rights and her son-in-law's potential as a photographer. The Arundales were returning to India, and as the depression deepened, Muriel decided "the children" should return to Perth. Axel arrived in July 1931 and began doing "home portraits", working from the crowded house in Outram Street where the household consisted of Muriel, her two daughters and their husbands and her sister's two children.



*The young Axel Poignant plays Pierrot to Rukmini Arundale's Columbine, Sydney c.1929-30; Rukmini Devi (Mrs George Arundale) in Indian dress, and dance pose, Sydney 1929-30; Sandra Poignant dressed for the Royal Garden Party, Perth 1934.*

Some of the living/working pressures lessened when from December 1933 to September 1934 Axel worked as one of the Western Mining Company's aerial survey assembly team for £4.10 a week. There he acquired his attraction to the aerial viewpoint and a second-hand Leica.



*Axel Poignant, Duke of Gloucester at Perth War Memorial, State Visit to Australia, 4 October 1934; The Duke of Gloucester opened the Royal Show in the presence of 67,000 people, 4 October 1934. Published in *The West Australian*, 5 October 1934, black and white photographs.*

Although isolated on the western rim of the continent, Perth's location made it a major gateway for visitors arriving by boat. In the 1930s it was a small and growing metropolis with a strong sense of itself — a lively place to live and work. Axel's first break-through was the commission and publication of aerial photographs, taken on 4 October 1934, of the arrival in Fremantle of

HMS Sussex, carrying the Duke of Gloucester to Australia on a state visit. But the assignment tested the technical limitations of his old Leica.

With the help of a loan of £80 from his Swedish aunt he bought a new Leica III rangefinder camera and Elmar 50mm lens. This assisted his next break-through the following January when he photographed the visiting “Russian” ballet company managed by Dandré (Victor Emilovitch Dandré), the husband of the recently deceased Pavlova. The company cooperatively held their positions at the end of a performance so that he could photograph the entire stage from the circle without additional lighting.



Program 1937 Linley Wilson School of Dancing (lighting: Axel Poignant); Alison Lee, dancer, Perth, c. 1936-38; Babs Fellowfield, as Isis in *The Egyptian*, 1937, handcoloured print. Courtesy His Majesty's Theatre Archives, Perth.

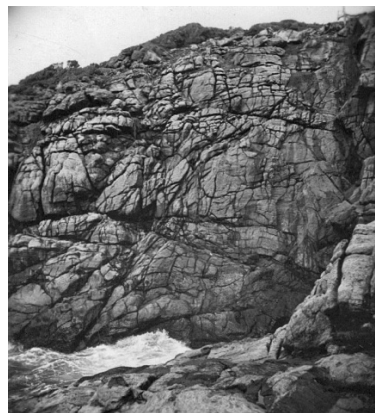
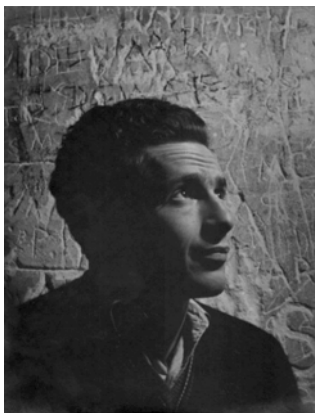
In Perth as in Sydney, the theosophists supported cultural activities such as dance and theatre, and Axel had soon established contacts with both Linley Wilson, who ran a dance studio, and Alison Lee, her former pupil and colleague. In 1935 when he at last set up a studio in London Court showcased dance pictures attracted clients, and many of the young debutants he photographed were former pupils at Linley Wilson's School of Dancing. Early in 1936, Muriel Chase died unexpectedly of a heart attack and the now strained marriage with Sandra ended, although the divorce was not finalised until 1941. (Sandra returned to Sydney and *The Manor* and in 1940 moved to New Zealand.)

Axel was reported as a young man about town in the company of the dancers Alison Lee and Linley Wilson. He mixed with and photographed artists of more radical persuasion, such as John and Ray Oldham, Maurice Lachberg and Harold Vike. The 1986 exhibition and catalogue, *Aspects of Perth Modernism 1929-1942* organised by Julian Goddard at University of Western Australia Gallery, vividly conveys the decade's mix of radical politics and the lively creative arts scene, embracing visual arts, architecture, music and theatre. *The West Australian* reported in September 1937 on an exhibition of modern photography at the Carlton Club in Hays Street, including “special Russian ballet studies by Axel Poignant” and on 10 May 1938 at “Axel Poignant's studio a screening of Eisenstein's “*The Ten days that Shook the World*” was held. He lectured on still photography and filmmaking for the University of WA Adult Education courses.



*Axel Poignant, Working Bullocks, Logging, Karri Forest, Pemberton, WA, September 1935; Banner of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, oil on canvas by Harald Vike, Labour Day March 1939, Perth.*

If the acquisition of the Leica III helped Axel to hone his skills as a portraitist, it also provided means to escape the studio. In 1935 he had embarked on a picture story of the timber industry, in the karri forests, Pemberton, and followed this with a photo essay on Kalgoorlie in 1936, but the only outlet was in the sale of a few postcards. That same year The Workers' Art Guild was founded with Keith George as its leading creative spirit – with Axel photographing their theatrical productions and assisting with the lighting – as he continued to do with dance performances.



*Axel Poignant, Vincent Serventy, naturalist c.1939-40; Rock face, south coast near Bremer Bay, WA, c.1939-40; Naturalists Club excursion, WA, Perth, c.1938.*

When he escaped the city, photographing and filming in the bush, particularly the details of bird, and animal behaviour his circle of friends extended to include members of the Naturalist Club, particularly the young Vincent Serventy and Norman Hall, a journalist working on family newspapers in Pingelly and Narrogin. Norman was a good organiser and enabler, and both relished a friendship that involved serious discussion about photography. During the Christmas/New Year break of 1940/41 these three and several others undertook a naturalists' photographic excursion to the Abrolhos Islands, aboard the auxiliary yacht the *Seagoer*, built and skippered by Vic. Lane, and it was on this occasion that Axel photographed the fledgling sea osprey on the nest.



*Norman Hall and Axel Poignant on Abrolhos trip, Christmas break 1940-41; Axel Poignant, Hal Missingham and son, David 1940-41.*

Wartime in Europe led to the return of many Australian expatriates, including Hal and Esther Missingham and John and Pat Thompson who shared Axel's interests. Hal joined the weekend photographic excursions, and in September 1941, they held their joint exhibition.

Wartime brought new opportunities for film-making both for the Red Cross and for the Army and Axel later was commended for a training film "Advance Against All Opposition." However, in seeking to enlist as a cinematographer and, in spite of his British birth certificate, he was determined a foreigner and required to take out naturalisation papers. Thus, in May 1942 Axel joined Hugh Wilson and his party of ornithologists who teamed up with a working party repairing the wells along the Canning Stock Route, in preparation for bringing cattle down from the north, under the threat of a possible Japanese invasion.



*Axel Poignant, On the Canning Stock Route, Hugh Wilson, leader, 1942; Flooded Trees, Canning Stock Route, 1942.*

The unexpected happened and the rains came breaking a seven-year drought. The party had left Kalgoorlie on 20 June, but couldn't leave Wiluna until 1 July. In 12 days they advanced only 17 miles: the camel-drawn wagons bogged down and the skies were overcast, but the desert

bloomed overnight. The waterholes filled and thousands of birds appeared from nowhere. For the young photographer the experience of the regeneration of the desert was akin to a spiritual one; he determined not to be bound to a city and a studio again.

The Canning Stock Route photographs don't record the expedition's progress; instead but they convey the essence of the experience in images of both vastness and intimate detail, particularly in the portraits of the bush workers and the Aboriginal pastoral workers met along the way. This focus on face is deliberate. Each teamster presented his own idiosyncratic self to the photographer's lens, and in the prints the openness of countenance still today delivers a visual shock that exposes both the vulnerability and the brutality of their lives.



*Axel Poignant, from left to right: Ted Graham, the camel man; A teamster; Head Stockman, from Canning Stock Route, June-July 1942.*

It is the Aboriginal stockman rather than the white bush worker who has been endowed with heroic stature, and the photographs of him and of the young mother with her newborn baby have been singled out for their humanity of vision. At one level it is easy to place these images within the social realist frame of the period, but to attribute their power solely to formal aspects of representation is to ignore the way in which the subtle enabling role of the photographer encouraged an element of self-presentation — an assertion of natural dignity. This point is given emphasis by the way in which the more awkwardly framed portrait of the Aboriginal stockwoman draws attention to the fragility of the photographic moment and the photographer's determination to hold both the hands and head within the frame. Her quiet demeanour reflects self-assured competence. These photographs are witness not only to the positive social roles of the Aboriginal pastoral workers but also to moments of personal lives.



*Axel Poignant, Jack Michael and his family and cart, Pingelly district 1938-39; Aboriginal stockwoman, Canning Stock Route, 1942.*

And what of the photographer? According to Linley Wilson's letters to Axel 's parents they were "together" from the late 1930s and only awaited the finalisation of his divorce to marry, but it was not to be. Linley Wilson married Keith George and when Axel returned to Perth from the Canning Stock Route he married a recent newcomer to Perth, Ruth Pettersen, by special license. He joined the army and crossed the continent to Sydney where he spent the rest of the war photographing secret documents at base camp; until he was seconded out of the army in 1945 to work on *The Overlanders*, after Harry Watt saw his Canning Stock Route film footage.

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## **Axel Poignant: References and Further reading**

*Exhibition of Photographs Axel Poignant – Hal Missingham*, foreword by Alec King, Perth, 1941.

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Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica, The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, Reaktion Books, London, 1997, see pp99-107, George Arundale establishes a photographic gallery, Indore.

## **Roslyn Poignant, a personal comment and thanks**

The origins of this exhibition owe much to friendship: friends made in the 1930s in Perth who supported and encouraged each other in their creative endeavours; friendships that endured with Norman Hall, Hal Missingham, and Pat and John Thompson, and friendships that were renewed, as ours was with Rukmini Arundale in the 1970s in London, and Alison Lee in 1982, when we visited Perth for a showing of Axel's retrospective exhibition. When Alison learnt Axel had hardly any of his dance photographs from the 1930s she pressed on him the small handmade book of proofs he had made for her so long ago.

The origins of this exhibition also owe much to "The Gestetner Box" which served as a storage container for Axel's photographic negatives, prints and related notes during his wanderings. In 1929 in Sydney he worked for a year as head mechanic at Gestetner's, makers and distributors of a reprographic machine (forerunner to the photocopier), and when he departed for Perth he had packed his belongings in Gestetner's sturdy wooden crates –as he did again when he moved back to Sydney. When I met Axel in 1950, and asked to see some of his own photographs, he fetched an album from the Gestetner Box. The album was empty except for five or six prints of the key photographs taken on the Canning Stock Route. That was enough. The power of these images has not diminished with the years. It made new friends of a younger generation: Ace Burke, Ruark Lewis, Martin Thomas, and Chris Wright and I thank them warmly for their support. Thanks too, to Axel Debenham Lendon, for the loan of print of *Artist's Hand*. I am deeply grateful to Jo Holder for this opportunity to show the Perth photographs — with the inclusion of the 1934 aerials —their rediscovery has somewhat changed the narrative. Thanks to Maxine Kauter for curatorial assistance. Thanks particularly to Simon Drake, National Film and Sound Archive, for the digitisation of the A.P. Canning Stock Route film and to Ben Dearnley Photography. I would also like to acknowledge the insights I acquired in discussions in the 1990s with Dylan Hyde, who had researched and recorded the activities of the Workers' Art Guild in 1930s Perth so meticulously, and archivist Joanna Sassoon who paved my way in several Western Australian archives in 1997. As always my loving thanks to family, especially Terry Carlbom, Carolyn Berger and Gus Poignant Berger.