

At the last, an epilogue presents a façade of empty boxes. The archive, Spieker insists, is more than its infrastructure.

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Agents of Empire: How E.L. Mitchell's Photographs Shaped Australia, by Joanna Sassoon, Australian Scholarly Publishing, North Melbourne, 2017, x + 260 pp., AUD\$44.00 paperback, ISBN 978 1 925333 73 2

Agents of Empire: How E.L. Mitchell's Photographs Shaped Australia is a fascinating biography of commercial photographer Ernest Lund Mitchell, intertwined with a detailed examination of how his photographs, particularly of Western Australia and Queensland, were used to promote Australia to the Empire. The work is based on author Joanna Sassoon's PhD thesis and journal articles.

Joanna Sassoon has extensive experience and knowledge in managing archival photographic collections and is an internationally respected historian and archivist. She brings both a historian's perspective and an archivist's focus on context to her examination of E.L. Mitchell's photographs. The work features extensive reproductions of the photographs under discussion, which allows the reader to appreciate the knowledge and analysis that Sassoon brings to bear on her analysis. Sassoon considers: the content of the photographs; their role in creating a sense of 'social harmony, economic stability and Australia's connections to the British Empire' (p. viii); how they were circulated and made accessible; and finally how their 'archival afterlives' are influencing views of twentieth-century Australia (p. ix).

Agents of Empire is divided into three parts:

- (1) Production – provides a narrative of the life of E.L. Mitchell, the places he photographed in Queensland and Western Australia, and the aesthetic and visual literacy to 'paint a reassuring picture of progress, order and consensus' (p. 45).
- (2) Reproduction – charts the use and distribution of Mitchell's photographs, their inclusion in official/government photographic collections and loss of context 'to become symbols and stereotypes of "Australia" for audiences across the world' (p. 170).
- (3) Preservation – details the organisation, dispersal, preservation and partial loss of Mitchell's archive.

'Preservation', and the chapter on 'Afterlives', intrigued me and reinforced the fundamental importance of context to our work. Sassoon explores Mitchell's recordkeeping, his organisation and arrangement of the commercial photographic collection, including the storage of the most valued Western Australian negatives in 'butterboxes' (p. 228), and Mitchell's own appraisal and dispersal of parts of the collection.

Sassoon reminds us that for photographs and photographic collections to function as accurate and authentic evidence, and not just content or images, the photograph or photographic collection needs to be connected to contextual information. Sassoon details

the work that she undertook to identify Mitchell's photographs (scattered across Australia – and the world – in many library/museum/archival collections), and her work to demonstrate 'how Mitchell's photographs moved into international collections and their subsequent uses by using a range of unconventional sources created for routine administrative purposes' (p. 242). This work has drawn upon a wide range of secondary sources, and archival collections of many of Australia's cultural institutions.

I would have liked to see a consolidated listing of all photographic images included in the work, so that I as a reader could see the diversity and geographical spread of the images. Perhaps this may be possible for the next edition of this splendid work?

In Sassoon's indefatigable search for and collation of contextual information, she has built a rich biographical source about each image and then each photographic print in order to track the multiple provenances of each image. It is this forensic tracking that has led me to understand why each particular print was originally created and its unique history, and how it performed the role it was created to serve. (p. 242)

Sassoon is critical of the practices of a number of cultural institutions that have collected, managed, broken up, re-housed, re-arranged, destroyed or lost parts of the Mitchell collection, and most importantly, destroyed, or removed the contextual information of the images. Digitisation and documentation practices of institutions are also criticised: photographs are digitised in a manner 'which values their image content above the contexts' of the image (p. 244); and 'documentation practices of cultural institutions charged with preserving photographic objects and their meanings now make it extremely difficult to track the provenance, chains of ownership and lives of photographs in order to use them as evidence' (p. 245). Hopefully these criticisms will spark further discussions amongst the profession about how we can better preserve context alongside the photographic image.

While this is a scholarly work, it is also of interest to West Australians, and those interested in twentieth-century Australia. It is beautifully written and engaging. There is much to enjoy and to reflect upon in this work by Joanna Sassoon, from the fascinating biography of E.L. Mitchell and his commercial photography, to the eloquent discussions about photographs and how they were re-used and re-purposed to support the selling of Australia to the Empire.

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