

Amateur Perfection

The Photograph Albums of Sir Russell Grimwade

by Jason Benjamin



Sir Russell Grimwade (1879–1955) was an industrious man whose inquiring mind embraced diverse interests over the span of his life. From an early age he developed a passion for scientific experimentation and study encompassing botany, chemistry, agriculture and astronomy as well as a host of related hobbies. In public life his contributions to business, the arts and philanthropy made him one of the most respected Australians of his time. Grimwade is best remembered today as a generous benefactor to the people of Victoria through his donation of Captain Cook's Cottage and for the substantial bequest he and his wife made to the University of Melbourne in the form of the Miegunyah Fund.

Much has been written on various aspects of Grimwade's life;¹ however, one that has received little attention is his accomplishment as an amateur photographer. Over a period of 40 years, beginning in 1896, Grimwade filled 35 albums with an estimated 2000 of his own photographs. Covering subjects ranging from family and friends to travel and his general interests, these albums provide a fascinating insight into their creator's life and times.

The albums, now housed at the University of Melbourne Archives, represent a remarkable body of work that testifies to Grimwade's photographic talent and enthusiasm. But other than the albums, there are few signs of Grimwade's interest in photography. His own biographical writings include only indirect references to it,² and his biography, written by John Poynter in the 1960s, only devotes half a page to the subject.³ With next to no additional sources available to us we are left with only these albums to go by in reconstructing this part of his life. But the intact albums and the length of Grimwade's photographic activity allow us insight into his attitudes towards and practice of photography, from his earliest shots onwards.

Above: Harlestone Darkroom, 3rd April 1898. Russell Grimwade standing at the door of the darkroom built in the garden of his parents' house. This photograph was most likely taken by his elder brother, Norton. Image ID UMA/I/3076.

Garden at the Melbourne Club, 26/9/1935. This image is one of a number from the 1930s that represent a period of deliberate artistic experimentation by Grimwade. Image ID UMA/I/3371.



The young photographer

Russell Grimwade was 16 when first introduced to photography in early 1896 by Norton, his elder brother. Norton, who was 13 years his senior, was an accomplished amateur photographer in his own right and had already adorned the grounds of the family home, Harleston, with a fully-equipped dark room. The earliest photographs in Grimwade's albums date from this period and clearly represent the work of a novice, as a number of shots are poorly focussed and composed.

However, Grimwade was a quick learner and within a relatively short time began to display the quality that was to be indicative of his work. Before long, he became proficient enough to produce portraits of his family that would have been equal, and in some cases superior, to those produced by contemporary professional photographers. In particular, two portraits, one of Norton and the other of his sister Alice, stand out for their quality. Taken in natural light outdoors, these images not only demonstrate Grimwade's technical ability, but their intimate mood shows his natural affinity with the medium.

The proficiency of Grimwade's photography after such a short time would seem astounding without an understanding of his nature. We know from his autobiographical writings that he had, from an early age, strong enthusiasms for scientific experimentation and technology. As a boy, he stocked his workshop, a converted room in his parents' stables, with as many instruments of science as his pocket money could buy. Batteries, galvanometers, electric motors and even an X-ray set were all



A panoramic view of the skyline of central Sydney, 24/3/1924.

Typical of the output of serious amateur photographers, images of Grimwade's travels dominate his work. Image ID UMA/I/3228.



Interior view, Westerfield, Baxter, Victoria, 08/01/1928.

Westerfield was built by Grimwade and his wife Mabel during the 1920s as a country retreat. Grimwade documented in detail its building and the subsequent establishment of the garden with his camera. Image ID UMA/I/3246.

proudly added to his collection and experimented upon.⁴ It is no wonder that photography appealed to him and that he so quickly became proficient at it. In light of his later career, one can imagine that the chemistry behind photography would have fascinated him and that such easy access to a dark room would have inspired many hours of experimentation. Photography was for Grimwade another science to explore and to master as he did so many others during his lifetime.

The 'serious amateur'

Grimwade's interest in photography was certainly not uncommon at the time. As in Europe and America, amateur photography became increasingly popular in Australia from the 1880s, as technical developments made it an appealing pastime.⁵ By the mid-1890s, amateur photographers had evolved into two identifiable groups of practitioners: the artistic and the serious. The artistic amateur was predominantly motivated by the aesthetic potential of the photograph. More generally known as 'pictorialists', this group favoured atmospheric landscapes, studio pieces fashioned after old masters, allegorical figures⁶ and highly composed outdoor views.

The serious amateur, however, was motivated by the camera's potential as a recording device and by its scientific nature. This group emerged during the first wave of enthusiasm generated by the introduction of the dry plate negative that allowed for much shorter exposure times. Serious amateurs were defined by their preference for capturing family life, travel and unexpected events, and for their

Harold jumping, Harleston, 29/05/1898. Harold was Grimwade's second eldest brother and a willing assistant in his experimentations in capturing movement. Image ID UMA/I/4111.



Bottle of water smashed by a bullet, exposure 1/1000 sec. Coolart, 19/01/1897. The image which marks Grimwade's mastering of the science of serious amateur photography. Image ID PA25p43.



enthusiasm for conquering the technical challenges posed by the camera. Clear, sharp images recording great detail were the aim and trademark of this group.

The contents of Grimwade's albums clearly identify him as a serious amateur almost to the point of being a textbook case. Images of his family in posed portraits and casual domestic scenes dominate the albums, as do photographs documenting his travels and other interests. And of course there was his enthusiasm for conquering the technical challenges posed by the camera.⁷

Some of the most striking images in the early albums are evidence of a concerted effort by Grimwade to master the capabilities of the camera through experimentation. As with many serious amateurs of this period the most alluring technical challenge for him was obviously the capture of movement. Multiple images recording horses racing and people in mid-air as they jump, attest to his fascination for perfecting clear and sharp images of movement frozen in time. Mastering shutter speed and timing was obviously a strong motivation in this stage of his work. The image taken at the very instant a bullet shattered a bottle must be considered the pivotal point of Grimwade's experimentation when he had clearly mastered the science of serious amateur photography.



Harleston, 12/11/1899, was the Grimwade family's Melbourne residence at 67 Balaclava Road, Caulfield. This image is representative of a number of Grimwade's early works that have strong pictorialist overtones. Image ID UMA/I/3137.



Coolart, 28/12/1897, was the Grimwade family's property at Somers (Western Port), where they regularly stayed during summer. Scenes of life at Coolart were a popular subject for Grimwade's early photography. Image ID UMA/I/3065.

The photograph as record

Grimwade's adolescent work of the 1890s was clearly dominated by his need to experiment and perfect his photographic skills. As he grew older however, this element of experimentation disappeared from his work. As a man with an active mind always looking for new challenges, it can be assumed that to a degree Grimwade's early enthusiasm for photography waned in favour of other interests. Once he had mastered this skill there was no longer a need to pursue it in its own right and therefore it was of less interest. The subject matter of photographs taken in his early twenties, reveals that photography had largely become a method for recording things he found interesting and as a tool to be used when required.

Although Grimwade's experimental phase came to an end, his work as an adult continued to be largely dominated by the interests of the serious amateur. In particular, travel became a popular theme,⁸ as did a more focussed attention on his research, especially in the area of his botanical work where his technical skills are very apparent.⁹

In the body of work, however, there is evidence that Grimwade occasionally endeavoured to produce images of an artistic nature. Of his adolescent works, a number have a quality of composition that has strong pictorialist overtones. Notable among these are a number of views taken in 1897 at Coolart, his family's country estate on Westernport Bay, that depict children fishing and swimming. It

Melbourne skyline, Victoria, 28/10/1933. Image ID UMA/I/3330.



Hascombe, Macedon, 21/06/1906.
Owned at the time by friends of the Grimwades, the Whiting Family. The motor car was fast becoming a part of daily life for the wealthy. Image ID UMA/I/3475.

is hard to say, however, if these images are the result of an accident of composition or a deliberate attempt at aesthetic photography — the apparent posed look of some would certainly suggest the latter.

His later works do show a more conscious effort to produce artistically motivated images but these are few in number and often produced years apart, which would suggest an occasional dalliance rather than any series attempt at sustained artwork. The most notable of these were made during the first half of the 1930s when his work seems to reflect a more conscious artistic motivation than is normally evident. Included among these are some well-composed soft focus shots of the original Wilson Hall at the University of Melbourne, architectural features of Miegunyah, the gardens of the Melbourne Club and of the city skyline taken from the banks of the Yarra River.

These albums are full of many images that reveal a great deal about their creator. Recording his interests and passions from youth to middle age, they provide us with valuable information on Grimwade's activities and nature that compliment and illustrate what we know of him from other sources. In regards to his photography, the albums alone hold the story of this aspect of his life. The images demonstrating his early proficiency, his youthful experimentations with movement, his later application of skills in his botanic work and forays into artistic expression, all narrate a part of the story that reveal the motivations behind this accomplished amateur photographer.

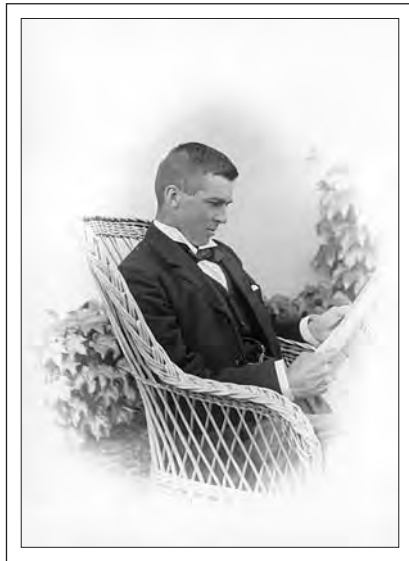
The photographs in a different medium

In 2003 the University of Melbourne Archives received a generous grant from the Miegunyah Fund for the purpose of further enhancing the University of Melbourne Archives Image Catalogue (UMAIC). Because of the rich nature of Grimwade's collection and the obvious connection with the Miegunyah Fund, these images were the first selected to benefit from this grant and be made publicly available online. Six hundred images from this collection have now been selected, digitised and catalogued on UMAIC. Due to Grimwade's methodical identification and dating of his images, it has been possible to contextualise many of them with historical descriptions written from a diverse range of sources. It is hoped that as further resources become available, the historical descriptions attached to the images will be further enhanced.¹⁰

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Notes

- 1 Most notable is John Poynter's comprehensive biography of Grimwade, (*Russell Grimwade*, 1967). A number of publications detailing his art collecting and legacy to the University of Melbourne have also been produced, as have papers relating to his scientific work. Born in Caulfield on 15 October 1879, Russell Grimwade was the youngest son of prominent Melbourne businessman Frederick Sheppard Grimwade and his wife Jessie Taylor Sprunt. He was educated at Melbourne Grammar School and the University of Melbourne, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in December 1901. After further study in London, Grimwade joined his family's chemical firm, Felton Grimwade and Co. in 1903. Taking a strong interest in scientific research and innovation, Grimwade pioneered large-scale oxygen production in Australia and conducted extensive research into the extraction of oils and compounds from indigenous plants. A strong interest in mechanics also led him to become a keen motorist and a founding member of the Royal
- 2 Grimwade's papers held by the UMA include a number of autobiographical writings in draft form on his childhood and adult interests, produced late in his life. The fact that Grimwade failed to discuss his photography in these would suggest that he did not think it worth noting, however, the scrappy nature of these writings strongly indicate an incomplete project. If time had been more generous we may well have had a discourse on his photography along the same lines as those on his passion for woodwork and automobiles.
- 3 John R. Poynter, *Russell Grimwade*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press at the Miegunyah Press, 1967, pp. 60–61.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 5 The most significant of these developments was the invention of the pre-sensitised dry plate glass negative which dramatically simplified photography by eliminating the need for the messy and complicated chemical preparation of negatives. Purchased ready to use, the dry plate was to set off a wave of innovations in camera design and developing processes.
- 6 K. Moore, *Jacques Henri Lartigue: the invention of an artist*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004, pp. 30–31.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Grimwade travelled extensively within Australian and abroad; his photographs taken on these trips feature in many albums.
- 9 In 1930 Grimwade published *An Anthography of the Eucalypts*, which detailed his extensive research on the Australian eucalypt. The 103 photographs in the book were all taken by Grimwade.
- 10 The Grimwade images can be viewed on UMAIC at <<http://buffy.lib.unimelb.edu.au/cgi-bin/mua-search>>.



Above: Two photographic portraits taken by enthusiastic amateur photographer, Russell Grimwade. (Alice, Grimwade's sister, and Norton, Grimwade's elder brother, taken on 29 November 1896.) University of Melbourne Archives image UMA/I/3041 and UMA/I/3042

Front Cover: In the four volumes of *Le Antichità Romane*, the 18th century Italian architect Giovanni Battista Piranesi used his architectural and artistic skills to examine archaeologically the physical remains of the Roman Empire. While Volume 2 recorded the remnants of funerary monuments and tombs, its frontispiece, *Antiquvs Bvii Viarum et Ardeatinae Prospectvs ad Lapidem Extra Portam Capenam* (ancient intersection of the Via Appia and Via Ardentina viewed at the second milestone outside the Porta Capena) imagines how the ruins may have looked in their time. (Library no. 508370)

Back Cover: See page 2.