CRAIG POTTON
NEW ZEALAND

To Catherine, my muse

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craig potton publishing

Introduction
John B. Turner

Landscape pictures can offer us, I think, three verities–geography, autobiography, and metaphor..... The three kinds of information strengthen each other and reinforce what we all work to keep intact–an affection for life.

Robert Adams [1]

I

Craig Potton is a phenomenon in New Zealand art—he is an exemplary photographer, a leading Green activist, and has enjoyed some success in business. Potton's colour landscape images, like the black and white classics of the great American photographer and conservationist, Ansel Adams, have become widely known through postcards, posters and books. He is a skilful writer, and following a bout of photographing landscapes for special effects in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Peter Pan* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,* he screen-wrote and presented the New Zealand documentaries *Rivers* (2010) and *Wild Coasts* (2011).

In kind, his *modus operandi* is not that different from pioneer New Zealand photographers such as D.L. Mundy and Alfred H. Burton; or the Tyree brothers, William and Fred, who, like Potton, chose Nelson as their base. They belong to a line of independent operators and self-publishers who decide what to photograph and how to do it, and take all of the risks associated with speculative business ventures. Mundy's speculations failed and he died poor, Burton retired with a modest profit, and William Tyree left photography to try his hand at engineering. Each practitioner, because of his artistic nature, left an impressive legacy of photographs to posterity that transcended the commercial imperatives of their time. So it is for Craig Potton, that he has set out first of all to photograph the things that mean something to him on an emotional level, and then to seek an audience for his vision. The strongest thematic thread in his work is the need to protect the natural environment, and this he pursues by interpreting its unique and awesome beauty. "All my life," he emphasises, "I've been my main editor, for better or worse."

As David Eggleton aptly noted in *Into the Light: A history of New Zealand photography* (published by Potton in 2006), 'Like a protest placard, the nature photograph warns us to save the wilderness and, like a communal hymn, exhorts us to share in the photographer's reverence.... Potton is the photographer as environmental activist, producing testaments to supernature. Through Potton's lens the earth becomes the source of elemental rhythms that connect decay to regeneration and Potton grants you access to its interconnectedness. A recurrent motif is the vortex: places where foliage, rock and water seem to twist inwards, as if to the heart of things. Landscape is a convergence, a spiritual resource, a holy book from which Potton's photographs, in their witnessing, quote chapter and verse.'

Eggleton, from the evidence of the great majority of Potton's published work, concluded that 'Potton rarely goes beyond splendour to depict spoilage—maybe a photograph of the gorse plague, but that's about it…' when it came to exploring desecration and pointing out transgressive models of nature. The historian's reservation is understandable, and Potton himself is largely to blame when critics, who acknowledge that his best work is second to none, suggest that his approach may have been too narrow. Potton admits that the demands of commercial publishing, and a keen appetite for his kind of Edenic images of New Zealand scenery, have dictated his published output to some degree, and influenced the public and art world's limited perception of him as a photographer. The magnificent New Zealand landscape pictures chosen among his favourites for this volume will not change that perception, and nor is it intended to. This book follows his seminal *Moment and Memory* (Craig Potton Publishing, 1998), which, more than a portfolio of his finest landscapes, was envisaged as a summation of his artistic achievement. His technical notes alone were a lesson for anybody wanting to become a serious photographer. Remarkably, because it is no easy feat, he succeeded in putting into words some of the elusive spiritual awakenings he had experienced in the mountains, forests and sea.

When the great photographer Paul Strand noted that 'We can only say what we can see', he was thinking about the depth of an artist's vision. To gather a critical overview of an artist's work, however, depends on what the artist shows. Potton has in fact made his fair share of images of the destruction of nature. Some can be seen in scattered publications, and as an avid collector of challenging books, and a tireless gallery-goer, he is well aware of the transgressive models of nature alluded to by Eggleton. Potton has made substantial work in a variety of genres, including black and white, which have never been published, and like most photographers he has a storehouse of personal photographs on the intimacies of family life.

What little of this other work that has been seen has largely been presented in exhibition form, and often for overseas audiences. One such was his inclusion in 'Reveries', a group exhibition on the consciousness of death, curated by Helen Ennis, for the Canberra Portrait Gallery, Australia, in 2007. Both Potton, and his fellow New Zealand exhibitor, Anne Noble, contributed photographic essays; Noble on the death her father, Potton on the death of his wife Beverly, from cancer. The real wonder, perhaps, is that he has remained so intensely focussed on promoting conservation through positive examples, and not hived off to deliver essentially the same message in a more alarmist manner. (Paul Strand, after a youthful bout of obvious social criticism, also made the decision to accentuate the positive as a valid critical alternative to showing the horrors he wanted to change.)

For years Potton never pursued making exhibition prints of his photographs, simply because the quality of printing from colour transparencies was inferior to offset printing for his work. He had a few of his images printed as dye transfers in the United States, but like so many photographers the potential for making more accurate and subtle colour prints by new archival processes has rekindled his interest, and he now frequently exhibits in galleries both in New Zealand and internationally. In the New Zealand art scene, however, he was told by one senior art dealer that his pictures are considered 'too popular' for them to sell to local collectors. By which was meant, that because his pictures were widely available and readily accessible as photomechanical (offset) reproductions, and not just as fine art prints, they lacked the snob value of rarity.

This reminds me of the American artist Ben Shahn's ironic analysis of such thinking:

> The reasoning goes something like this: public taste has often failed to understand very great art, has indeed violently rejected it. This very art, however, so often has been richly vindicated by time and subsequent tastes. Logically, then, it seems to follow that if a piece of work is truly great it will necessarily be rejected by the public. Here the inversion begins to emerge, for the belief has thus become universal among refined people that if a work of art is thoroughly incomprehensible to the public it must automatically be good. And out of that non-Aristotelian reasoning comes the following principle widely proclaimed by artists and by critics: the work of art must not appeal to the public, or be understood by it.... [2]

Looked at another way, this relative disinterest from art collectors can be seen as a price Potton has paid for his independence and the fact that his work has sidestepped the usual curatorial and institutional filters of the art world that support the artist and fortify the private collector. Typically, as an artist, Potton tends to be his own harshest critic, and as a self-publisher he admits to a particular anxiety that other artists don't experience.

His formidable success rate is enviable, however, and by any criteria, Potton's 'Storm, Milford Sound, 1993' is one of the most extraordinary and beautiful pictures ever made in New Zealand. It is indeed, an example of 'the sublime given due weight and heft,' as described by Eggleton. This 'hand of God' image (my fond name for it) succeeds, as many great art works do, not only as a powerful description of place but as a wonderful metaphor for the mystery of nature that people intuitively respond to. It is one of Potton's signature works, and as such, has the stature of a 'Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico, 1941' by Ansel Adams, or Adams's equally popular 'Monolith, The Face of Half Dome, Yosemite National Park, California, 1927', which are sought after by private and public collectors willing to pay the equivalent of the cost of a modest New Zealand house for them. By contrast, few exhibition prints of Potton's signature image have been sold, even though this masterpiece typifies the best of his landscape work. Nevertheless, it should be noted that substantial numbers of other, more modestly priced exhibition prints, have been purchased by his admirers.

The first publisher to recognise the lasting beauty and serious purpose of Craig Potton's landscape photographs was Leonard Cobb, who in the early 1980s had employed the long-haired surfer and mountaineer to write four handbooks on New Zealand national parks. As a first-year student at the University of Canterbury, Potton and some flatmates helped form a group called the Beech Forest Action Committee, and worked with huge urgency and dedication to stop a scheme to have a Japanese company clear-fell 600,000 hectares of native beech forest on the West Coast of the South Island, convert one half of the native forest to pine trees, and feed the other half into a pulp mill. Potton became totally involved as one of the leaders of the voluntary conservation movement to save the country's native forests at the time, and it wasn't until he was 30 that he seriously took up photography for that cause. "How do you tell people in Auckland how good the West Coast forests are? You show them photographs!

"It is interesting to think about the nature and feedback we got from what we called 'cottage meetings' of up to 70 or 80 people, where we would have 35mm slideshows using the old Kodak carousel projectors with 80-slide trays," he recalls. "So I was amused to note that the American photographer Nan Goldin, who is best known for her book, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, used the same method for showing her photographs of alternative, usually hidden, lifestyles. When I found out that she also uses music, like we sometimes did, I realised that what I used to do with forests she was doing with sex!

"We got a lot of feedback from the meetings and slideshows, then, eventually, with a bang, we were successful in stopping that madness. Later the Beech Forest Action Committee expanded out from that campaign to The Native Forests Action Council, and then the Maruia Society. NFAC published a calendar, mostly with Guy Salmon's photographs, to raise money, and I drifted into doing my own first calendar when Leonard Cobb asked me to. When he asked me to illustrate the books on national parks that we wrote for the Department of Lands and Survey, he also asked me to help design the books, which was very unusual at the time. I liked photography but these books were small format and could not do justice to the photographs I was taking. In particular I ended up with a whole lot of good photographs of an area that we were trying to save, the Paparoas, the country behind Punakaiki on the West Coast of the South Island. That's where my own first book, *Images from a Limestone Landscape* (with a text by my friend Andy Dennis), came from, and basically I formed a company so that I could keep control of that."

Potton is a perfectionist who realised what was missing in his own work whenever he saw books such as the Sierra Club classic, Eliot Porter's *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World*, which utilised the highest production values. Closer to home, he was corresponding with the Australian photographer Peter Dombrovskis (1945-1996), a kindred spirit who was trying to save the forests of Tasmania—a fight, which Potton reminds me, that is still going on. "Ian Macdonald, who ran Real Pictures lab and gallery in Auckland's Queen Street, was around at that time, and was taking immensely better photographs than me because he, like Porter and Dombrovskis, also used a big camera, not 35mm." Potton studied his options: tried a 5x4 inch view camera but did not like viewing the picture upside down under a dark cloth. So finally he chose the Pentax 6x7 cm camera as his camera of choice.

The issue, as he explains it, is largely perceptual and conceptual. For studied images of complex landscapes Potton was critical of the hand-held photography that came with Henri Cartier-Bresson and others that "looked like they had just flung the camera around." He thought their images should have been sharper and was sceptical when Brian Brake told him that he could hold the camera steady at 1/30th of a second or less, thinking, "Well yes, you can Brian, but if I print it, it'll come with a blur." (Interestingly, Cartier-Bresson concluded that the photograph was fundamentally surreal even when it is not pin-sharp, and Brake certainly used a tripod when he felt it necessary.)

"I was comparing my colour work with photographers like Porter, and Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, who were associated with the American f64 group, and others like Walker Evans, who all made images with full depth of field. One of the strengths of photography is that it can show everything in focus, from near to far, which is not something our eyes can do. That's one of the weird tricks of photography and there is something strange and unique about it, especially when all the image is pin-sharp. That's also what I liked about the best work of John Johns, the New Zealand Forest Service photographer. If you're going to make good photographs, play to the medium's strength. When I looked at their photographs, I thought, 'Good God, I can see the universe on the wall, all in one place, bounded by a rectangle.' It's fascinating. And I've never thought that a photograph was a perfectly accurate representation of what is depicted."

To explain, he refers to René Magritte's famous painting, 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe' (1928-29), with which the Belgian surrealist wittily reminded his viewers what they were actually looking at and responding to. Potton's formative art influences were many and varied, starting with the 19th Century and early 20th Century New Zealand paintings collected by his parents; to reproductions of work by his favourite U.S. abstract expressionists, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollack and Ad Rheinhardt, and great photo essays from *Life* and *National Geographic* magazines, topped with *Vogue* and *The Family of Man*. An avid book collector and gallery-goer, his approach was strongly influenced by Sally Eauclaire's enunciation of the 'New Color' photography of those such as Stephen Shore, Joel Meyerowitz, Jan Groover, Richard Misrach and William Eggleston. What he learned

Storm, Milford Sound, Fiordland National Park

Morning mist at Lake Paringa, South Westland

Kahikatea trees in mist at Lake Mapourika, Westland/Tai Poutini National Park

Waterfall on the Mangatini Stream, Buller, Westland

Waterfall on the Mangatini Stream, Buller, Westland

Fox Glacier, Westland/Tai Poutini National Park

Lower reaches of the Fox Glacier, Westland/Tai Poutini National Park

Oparara Arch in the Oparara Basin, Kahurangi National Park

Rainforest near Ship Creek, South Westland

The Pancake Rocks at Punakaiki, Paparoa National Park

Blowhole at the Pancake Rocks, Punakaiki, Paparoa National Park