

JOHN WILLIAM LINDT F.R.G.S. OF MELBOURNE

THE STORY OF THE CAMERA IN AUSTRALIA

BY JAKE CATO

CHAPTER XIII

IF you asked an elderly man to day if he knew Lindt, and he had done so, he would immediately reply: "Oh! Yes, I knew the great Lindt!" I can be quite certain of this because I've asked the same question scores of times and received the identical answer. Lindt was always known as "The Great Lindt" and with good reason, for very occasionally nature produces a man strong in body, in mind, and in force of character, and then—not quite satisfied—tosses in something extra. This "something extra" becomes his press-agent and his herald. It adds something to his stature that makes men say when they arrive home and empty their pockets of the day's gossip: "I saw The Great Lindt today!" And what magnificent advertising it becomes. Lindt, more than any other man of the camera in Australia, had this publicity personality.

Don't misunderstand me and think of him as a cheap showman—nothing could be further from the truth, as he was a man of great dignity, but he was simply a great MAN and wherever he happened to be he was as obvious as a mountain in a desert.

He was a handsome giant with a barrel of a chest, a dark sandy beard, and a mass of strong hair. He had high principles and all the fine virtues of the mid-nineteenth century German; was shrewd in business and industrious; a lover of music, fluent in four languages, and possessing a quality of charm which brought him friends in high places. He loved congenial company, was impatient with bores, could also be over-forceful and dominating, and never far away was that touch of austerity which, in his later years, was to turn him into something of a recluse.

Born in Germany in 1845, he was not happy at home and ran away to sea when he was 17. Long voyages in a Danish sailing ship helped to build his powerful constitution. In 1862 he sailed past the coast of New Guinea, his curiosity intrigued to know what savage life lay inside the jungles of that unexplored country.

At Brisbane he deserted ship and "went bush". For over a year he travelled the outback stations where his musical and mechanical abilities earned him a comfortable livelihood. Here he found the homestead pianos in poor condition through neglect and the stresses of a sub-tropical climate, and not only tuned the instruments but could take them apart and make and restore any damaged pieces.

His travels eventually took him as far south as Grafton in New South Wales where he joined forces with Wagner the local photographer. Wagner specialised in pictures of the natives of the Clarence River coastal region, for which he had huge sales abroad. It was here that Lindt began the career in which his chief life interest ever remained, that of taking his camera amongst natives in the out-of-way places of the world.

In 1868 he bought out Wagner and began his studies of native life. Hundreds of 20 x 16 prints of this period are stored in our Historical Societies. His albums went to Royalty, to scientific societies, to Parliamentary Libraries—while his large pictures were exhibited in every industrial exhibition throughout the world. Here, we need to remember that all these prints were made direct from 20 x 16 wet plate negatives.

Lindt sold out in 1876 and came down to Melbourne—then known as the richest city in the world. The wealth produced from the gold rush days was now in the hands of groups of established families who were in control of finance, commerce, and industry. They were building great Italianate homes that were almost palaces, in St. Kilda Road, Toorak, and in other opulent suburbs. Here were thousands of rich people—Galsworthy's "Forsytes" in an alien land, where the home and its row of stables often rose out of primeval bush.

These men were tasting power and glorying in it. Lindt had the dignity and rugged manliness that appealed to them, and he also had a touch of Continental *savoir-faire* that could charm their wives. He fitted his environment perfectly. So he opened a studio near the top of Collins Street, soon became known as "the rich man's photographer", and set about recording all the opulence which expressed their sense of pride in personal achievement.

He took endless pictures of their homes and their carriages, groups of the family from their christenings to their burials, even recording the family vaults and the marble angels and seraphims hovering above—all imported from Italy at a cost of thousands of pounds.

He specialised in pictures of the family grouped informally on the lawns with the facade of the home in the background, and the servants and retainers lining the rails of the upstairs balcony. These pictures effectively recorded the social and financial atmosphere of the period and document all the trends and fashions of the day.

In the foreground of one of them is a little boy in a sailor hat, who grew up to be a Federal Prime Minister, and later became Viscount Bruce of Melbourne.

In 1881 when the Dry Plate was becoming popular, Lindt felt that, because it was so much easier to use, its general adoption would lower the prestige and the profit of photography, so he took a trip to Europe with the object of linking up with agencies for equipment, as he was also a dealer and had invented a number of cameras and useful accessories.

On his return to Melbourne he found the discussions which were taking place on the proposed annexation of southeast New Guinea fired the nostalgic interest that had simmered since those far off days when he first sailed this coast. Major-General Sir Peter Scratchley, who was sent out to Australia in 1860 to superintend and construct all coastal defence works, was to take charge of the expedition. Lindt offered his services as official photographer and was eventually appointed under special commission from "Her Most Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria of England."

How thankful he must now have been for the Dry Plate.

They sailed from Sydney on the *Governor Blackall* in 1885 and cast anchor at Port Moresby a fortnight later. Lindt immediately set to work to record every available aspect of this great island and its varied tribes.

His first journey was up the Laloki River as far as the Rano Falls to the native villages at Sadara and Makara. Here, under the gentle persuasion of gee-gaws, he was able to get a good set of negatives, and later some of his best shots showing a native regatta of lakatois at Port Moresby harbour.

A far inland journey to the Owen Stanley Ranges produced some beautiful landscapes and numerous exposures of native habits and customs. Lindt developed at night with the aid of a hurricane lamp wrapped in red trade cloth.

He and his assistant went to many places where no white man had previously been, and though many of the tribes were headhunters they probably wondered what they had encountered for Lindt was utterly fearless and completely dominated them—he made them carry all his kit, provide him with food, and pose in all sorts of places and positions before the "Evil Eye" of his camera.

In return for all this Lindt would bare his great white body to a skimpy loin cloth and sit in the sun while they crowded around in wonder. As the news of Lindt travelled into the hills, tribesmen came long distances to see him. Several times he travelled back with them to their homes, alone except for his assistant, to places no white traveller had ever seen, and brought back to Melbourne a great store of stone age implements and weapons they had given him.

There was very real danger from disease and savages in New Guinea in those days, and many of the party became sick with fevers. But Lindt thrived on danger. He wrote to a friend in Melbourne: "For my own part I never felt better in my life and shall certainly not worry myself with apprehensions, but meet the evil when it comes."

In one village they came upon sixteen natives who had just been massacred by another tribe; while Captain Miller, an Australian, was murdered a few miles from them, and they succeeded in arresting the murderer.

During a tour around many of the islands, news arrived that his wife was seriously ill, so Lindt returned immediately to Melbourne, where he found her already on the road to recovery.

Sir Peter Scratchley died of fever on the return journey, and Lindt took the last picture of this expedition when he went aboard the *Governor Blackall* at Port Phillip and photographed the flag-draped catafalque and its solemn guard.

Lindt had brought back from the world's worst climate for photography a splendid collection of negatives. Taken altogether, they formed a complete panorama of life and conditions in Britain's newest protectorate, to say nothing of a most valuable and uniquely illustrated contribution to the world's travel literature.

The next two years were devoted to maintaining the studio, cataloguing and printing all the negatives, writing his great book *Picturesque New Guinea* which he dedicated to Queen Victoria, and also to compiling pamphlets advertising the new equipment he was importing from Europe.

At its date of publication *Picturesque New Guinea* was the best illustrated travel book ever produced, and it brought Lindt world applause.

In 1889 he was off again, this time to the New Hebrides to take the native life and the volcanoes. The year following he went to Bega Island in the Fiji group to make pictures of the fire-walkers. This is a sacred ceremony and much time was spent persuading the chief to allow the camera to be set up. However, none could oppose Lindt for long and he made many exposures. These pictures, made pictorial by the clouds of smoke from the red-hot stones, were some of Lindt's best. His sales of these prints all over the world were enormous for all the sceptics had claimed that the audience was hypnotised or suffering some "optical deception". Lindt's 12 x 10 prints from the same sized negatives proved that the natives do walk over red-hot stones.

All of his island negatives were made into lantern slides and were the subject of hundreds of lectures which created almost a boom in island exploration because Lindt's striking personality, his vivid descriptive phrases, his powerful delivery, and his beautiful illustrations, were quite irresistible.

These trips and adventures were all very exciting but back at the studio there was seriously bad news to be faced, for Melbourne's golden honeymoon was over. The boom years of the seventies and eighties had inflated land and property values beyond all reason. Wild speculation and extravagant building operations ended in the bursting of the boom and resulted in the closing of five banks and over fifty building societies and other financial institutions, with a loss of one hundred million pounds in one year.

Almost overnight Lindt's clientele vanished. It was obvious that it would be years before these people had spending money for luxuries and as Lindt was not the man to tolerate the lowered standards of a depression, he added his own mite to the prevailing gloom, and closed his doors.

THE STUDIO IN A FOREST

Lindt had done a vast amount of portraiture—both wet and dry plate—in his city premises; he even published a pamphlet on retouching, stating "that it should be reduced to a minimum so as to retain the character in the face". But at heart he was an explorer. As early as 1883 he was exhibiting pictures of the Watts River, the Blacks' Spur, and the Ovens River district in Victoria. Of these the *Argus* reviewer says: "They are distinguished by great delicacy and artistic feeling, yet full of brilliancy and force."

His catalogue of prints set up in albums includes "Men of Mark in Australia", "Aboriginal Portraits", "Australian Forest Scenery", "Victorian Rivers", "Views of Melbourne", "Views of Adelaide", "Lorne, Louttit Bay, and Cape Otway", "Marine Subjects", "Melbourne Botanical Gardens", and "Lakes of Gippsland".

All his outstanding prints went away to Salons and Exhibitions—his published list of awards shows twenty first prizes as well as gold and silver medals and championship trophies.

As he carried his camera around Victoria, it becomes clear that his heart lay in the wilds of the Blacks' Spur, still covered with primeval forest, in the heart of the Great Dividing Range. Here we can picture Lindt in his element, sitting on some high peak, dreaming of a home in a clearing where the gums grew three hundred feet high and the gullies abounded in tree ferns.

Now was the time. He was free of his city ties. In five years he could make his dream a reality, and by then the city would be on its way to financial stability again! The very notion needed a stout heart and wild enthusiasm. Lindt possessed both in full measure as the slow moving authorities were soon to discover. He gave them no peace until he had permission to build, and even persuaded (bludgeoned is perhaps the right word) them into building a well-made road past his property over the Blacks' Spur from Healesville.

Here then, fifty miles north of Melbourne, on the top of the Blacks' Spur, in one of the most glorious settings in Australia, Lindt built "The Hermitage"—"The Studio in a Forest". He has left us a splendid series of photographic progress reports of the building operations. First we see giant mountain gums, some 75 ft. in girth at the base, lying piled on the ground wating to be burnt; then a wide open space appears in the forest. Here he built a kitchen and then a studio. As the road was completed "The Hermitage" grew, the garden was planted with shrubs from all parts of the world, tracks were made into the forest, to glades and waterfalls, and along the fern-covered stream that ran through the gully beside the house.

Eventually "The Hermitage" became a guest-house, the most popular port of call for tourists in Victoria. It embraced six separate buildings containing twenty bedrooms for visitors. High up on three great trees Lindt built tree-houses, approached by ladders, in the manner of the New Guinea natives. From them he took hundreds of pictures of the sunrise and sunset lighting his wild panorama during the passage of the seasons throughout the year—many of them showing his whole world mantled with snow in the winter.

The studio measured 100 ft. by 25 ft. with one entire side covered in ground glass. Here he photographed any of the guests who so desired. At one end of this room was a stage where any night Lindt would willingly project lantern slides and lecture to his guests. The walls were hung with the curios and weapons he had brought back from the islands.

But he preferred to work outside the studio rather than in it. Natives in their natural settings, and families against the backgrounds of their homes, had always been his forte. Here in the bush the whole region was his backdrop, and so he took his sitters against the trunks of the gums, in the gullies under the ferns, against the mountain beech and the sassafras.

His sitters were distinguished visitors to Australia, and famous people, not forgetting those who, bored with the artificial props and painted backgrounds of city studios, preferred the reality of nature. The soft light of the forest proved very flattering for portraiture and there was practically no retouching required. At some time Lindt had observed that the dappled light that fell through fern fronds on to a white dress, was a picturesque touch, for he made many pictures under these conditions. Melba frequently stayed at "The Hermitage".

With the coming of the motor car the supreme test was to drive the fifty miles from Melbourne and then climb the Blacks' Spur to Lindt's "Hermitage"—and the proof that one had done so was the photograph taken outside the lych-gate that led to the guest-house. All this was on solid rubber tyres when the speed limit was twelve miles an hour. Pleasant and prosperous were the years which followed. Best times of all were the winter nights when a group of musical cronies stayed at the house; then Lindt would bring out his 'cello and join them in playing his beloved Beethoven and Brahms, and on many a night he sang again the Wagnerian arias he had sung to the New Guinea savages as he sat naked in the sun.

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Back in 1880 Lindt had gone to Glenrowan to cover the capture of the Kelly Gang. By the time he arrived, Ned Kelly, with five bullets in his body, had been removed to hospital. Another photographer persuaded the police at Seymour to string up the burnt body of Joe Byrne for a photograph, and while he was taking his gruesome subject, Lindt turned his own camera on this sorry spectacle. Julian Ashton is on the extreme left.

In 1915 during the excitement of the Kaiser's War, because Lindt was a German, a public meeting was called at the local shire council hall to demand that he be sent to a concentration camp. The meeting was led by a man notorious for his heavy drinking. Lindt completely disconcerted the gathering by marching in and addressing it: "Gentlemen," he began, "it appears you don't like the 'DT' in my name. Well! Your chairman, you all know, deserves those letters far more than I do. They've probably inspired him on this occasion . . . etc., etc." Lindt completely cowed the chairman and quickly convinced the rest of them.

When he was well over sixty a noted criminal attacked him outside "The Hermitage". Lindt beat him insensible, tied him up, and rang the police. They arrived to find the criminal terror-stricken because a snake had coiled itself near his head. He threatened to murder Lindt but there was no more heard of him.

In his declining years he became rather a recluse in the home he had so prophetically named. When he was eighty years old and felt he was nearing the end, he applied for permission to be buried on his mountain top in sight of the lovely place he had carved from the wilderness, but his request was refused.

And then, as though to soften the insult and render him a requiem befitting a great German, all the forces of nature conspired to bid him farewell.

John William Lindt died at the age of eighty-one on the 19th February, 1926—a date famous in the history of Victoria as “Black Friday”. For days the ranges had been obscured in the smoke of smouldering bush. On Friday morning came the holocaust. The whole of the foot of Blacks’ Spur burst into flames, rising higher and higher to Lindt now lying on a funeral pyre greater than warriors ever raised for a hero of mythology. When at last “The Hermitage” stood isolated on a mountain of fire a sudden cloudburst poured a flood to kill the flames. In that wild tumult of flame and smoke, the Valkyries bore the soul of Lindt to his Valhalla.

The spirit of the place died with Lindt. For a while his widow continued to run it as a guest house, then she sold out and retired to the city. It passed from hand to hand, but no one seemed to manage it successfully, so nature and a bounteous soil took over and the forest came back again. The buildings are still there, in sad repair. It would take a deep purse to give the place life again.