

NICHOLAS JOHN CAIRE OF MELBOURNE

THE STORY OF THE CAMERA IN AUSTRALIA

BY JAKE CATO

CHAPTER XIV

NICHOLAS CAIRE came from a noble Scottish house of the name of Ker. Sometimes in the past they were allied to the successful ruling house and the right religion, and as elegant ladies and gallant gentlemen, lorded it over large estates; but there were other times when they were on the wrong side, then there were imprisonments and beheadings when the survivors were dispossessed and forced to flee to exile in France. Some of them came back with Mary Queen of Scots, and later supported Bonnie Prince Charles, only to lose their homes and possessions and fly in poverty to the Island of Guernsey. Here the Kers married into French families and the name became Caire because that was how the French pronounced it.

I was glad to discover this historical background of Caire's for if ever there was an aristocrat of the camera, in this country, it was he.

Nicholas John Caire was born at Guernsey on 28th February, 1837, and round about 1860 came out with his family to Adelaide, where his father went into business. From his youth he was affected with what Sam Hood so rightly called "the madness of photography". He refused to work or train at any other avocation, and he seems to have been allowed to indulge his hobby to his heart's content. He received help and instruction from Townsend Duryea, and soon began to make professional portraits of his friends.

He was travelling Gippsland in Victoria in 1865, taking wet plate pictures of the Lake Tyers natives and some good landscapes of the tree-lined roads rolling away to the Strzelecki Ranges.

In 1867 he opened a studio in Adelaide and three years later married and moved to Talbot near Clunes in Victoria, a district that was then having a boom period in gold mining. That was an excellent place for a young man to settle for a few years. Here was easy money and a not too particular clientele on which to practice. In 1876 he felt confident enough to open in Melbourne, which was then the largest and most populous city in Australia. He bought out T. F. Chuck's studio in the Royal Arcade, Collins Street, and was soon making some new and delightful portraits.

He was the first to take the "family group" from its stodgy full length formula and mass all the heads close together and vignette them off at the shoulders. Many of his prints of four or five sisters in white decolette frocks, with all their heads touching, taken against light backgrounds and vignetted, are charming.

He stayed in the city only eight years making portraits and landscapes, then in 1885 when the Dry Plate gave him freedom of the countryside, and also freedom to express his artistic sensibility, he made his home and his studio at No. 2 Darling Street, South Yarra, and devoted the rest of his long life to work in the bush, the gullies, and the mountains.

I've been careful how I used the word "artist" in these chronicles, but we must use it for Nicholas Caire. He had imagination and feeling, an artist's sense of beauty, and such a deep and abiding love of this bush of ours, that it had some special significance to him, which was unknown to Kerry or Lindt or any of his contemporaries. It was this sheer love of the place that inspired his picture with magic.

Good landscape photography is rarely economic because only so few hours of early morning or late evening are suitable for it. The artist who takes his camera to the bush finds the long shadows that give his pictures modelling and perspective, are there only for two hours after sunrise or for two hours before sunset. The whole period of a normal working day is practically wasted. The most he can do is use that time for selecting locations to which he will return when conditions of light and weather are right.

Caire insisted upon perfect conditions and so probably averaged only two pictures a day, but their quality was so outstanding that he could charge high fees, and sell his work in such quantities, that he was able to support himself and his large family in comfort.

Nicholas Caire was a short active man bursting with vitality. About him was something of that mischievous elfin quality which is often found in Frenchmen—a caricaturist would certainly have sketched him as resembling Mr. Punch. He was bubbling with good nature and overflowing with enthusiasms. Because he loved feeling fit, he wrote articles in *Life and Health*, a Melbourne magazine, about the “joy of breathing the health-giving mountain air”. Because he loved the bush he gave free lantern lectures to show people the beauties he had discovered, urging them to go forth and share in his delight. He wrote many articles to newspapers on the same theme. And because he was a good kindly soul, as soon as X-ray photography came to Australia, he gave his services one day a week free to the Melbourne General Hospital.

Caire and Lindt were competitors, yet they were staunch friends and admirers. Both wrote eulogies on each other; they even produced booklets and tourist guides together.

Caire's French was as fluent as his English. He read deeply in both languages and had a particular regard for our Australian poets. Many of the titles of his pictures come from Lawson, Gordon, and Banjo Paterson.

He was the first man in this country to make a series of narrative pictures showing the joys and tragedies in the lives of the pioneers. Amongst them are scores of settlers' huts in Gippsland, placed in such romantic settings beside bubbling streams and beneath the shade of tree-ferns, that we might well imagine this great district was settled by Bohemian artists.

Here we see “The Sick Stockrider” lying in a rough bunk cared for by his mate. Another is “Down on his Luck” showing a settler camped inside the butt of a burnt-out forest giant. This is not the camp of a “swaggie” but a settled home furnished with a bed, the inside hung with clothes, and the outside of the tree hung with pots and pans. There is a good “Fisherman's Shack” taken at Mallacoota; others are “Sunday at the Splitter's Hut”, “The Ranger's Cabin”, and every form of primitive dwelling made of logs, bark, palings, ferntrunks, and wattles.

Caire saw the moving story behind these crude huts, for here lived the men with big hearts who had bought a forest and with their own hands set about clearing it to make the dairy farms which today serve Melbourne. There are no women in these pictures. These men lived and worked alone, the women came later when the first home was built from the split timber of the fallen trees. No other artist has given us this phase of pioneer life, and Caire has done it supremely well. Scores of times he must have shared a night's shelter in these places so that he could rise early and compose his picture to catch the first light of the morning.

Nicholas Caire wrote a seventy-page book on the charms of Healesville, Blacks' Spur, Narbethong, Marysville, and the mountains of the Great Dividing Range. It warms the heart to read him waxing lyrical on “the beauty of the fernglades; of bush tracks through tall timber; of noisy cascades falling from precipices rising to majestic mountains; of gullies draped by nature with myrtle, sassafras, and blackwood”.

In one story called "The Good Old Coaching Days", he tells of "the exhilarations and excitement as the four-in-hand raced up the road from Wombat Creek to Fernshaw, and on to Blacks' Spur through a long avenue overhung with giant tree-ferns, with fern gullies spreading as far as the eye can see all over this vast hill".

Here also was Condon's Gully, and to Caire this was the most beautiful place in the world. He returned to it many times, camping beside its rippling waters, writing of its magic in the moonlight, setting up his camera for the sunrise or the sunset, telling us it should always be photographed on a dull day—and then leaving us the picture (which we illustrate) showing its enchantment in a burst of sunlight.

Caire did more than anyone to explore this great forest, and though other men (nearly always obscure prospectors) gave their names to its features, he discovered its beauty, recorded it, and left us the pictures of the wild beauty that bush fires and the vandals have done so much to destroy.

In 1888 the newly formed Alpine Club set about opening up Mount Buffalo which was then known only to a few cattlemen. Arrangements were made for Nicholas Caire to accompany the guides, Messrs. Carlyle and Weston, and spend several weeks camping on the plateau taking photographs. These were later used for a publicity campaign to arouse interest in "The Switzerland of the South", and to raise funds for the building of a road.

The publication of Caire's splendid pictures, his lantern lectures, and the profits from the sale of his prints (of which the Club took a percentage), probably did most to make Buffalo a famous tourist resort.

One of Caire's daughters has told me of the hazards of that journey—how Caire and his great 12 x 10 camera were hauled up by ropes to the peaks and lowered to dizzy ledges to get the best points of view. He returned thrilled with the beauties of Buffalo. When his daughter asked if he had seen many snakes, he replied: "No, no snakes, but I saw glory!" He was so exhausted with the strain of the journey that he had to rest up for a month.

Always Caire's pictures had figures in the foreground, cattle in the middle distance, or a coach rolling down a forest road, and he was the first camera man to see the pictorial quality of a flock of sheep. Often I've had to study a print of his a second time to make certain that it was not a copy of a painting. His rich subject matter, his fine composition, and his mellow tonal qualities seemed to be too good for a photograph.

He has left us many albums of prints set up in series and titled: "Waterfalls", "Rivers", "Fern Gullies", etc., and because of the strong romantic streak in him, there is a most intriguing collection showing the caves along the sea coast of Victoria.

A few of his negatives are stored and treasured, but the bulk of them were cleaned for the sake of the glass. A major part of Caire's business was in selling his pictures framed.

All our glass at that time was imported from abroad, chiefly from Belgium; but there were years during the first World War when, despite our "Rule Britannias", German submarines controlled the vital sea routes and no glass came out to this country, so Caire removed the film from his plate negatives with caustic soda and used the glass in frames.

It is difficult to assess the value of Caire's work to Australia. It was sent all over the world, where it proclaimed, not only a glowing report of our beauty spots, but, by its very artistry, flattered the measure of our culture.

Nicholas John Caire died in 1918 at the age of 81—the same age as his friend Lindt.