THE DIARIES OF
FRANK HURLEY
1912–1941
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Introduction

Frank Hurley is best known today as a photographer and filmmaker, and it has become common to refer to his major works by the titles of his documentary films: *The Home of the Blizzard*, *In the Grip of the Polar Pack-Ice*, *Sir Ross Smith’s Flight* and *Pearls and Savages*. But Hurley did not work in a single medium: he was an old-fashioned showman whose repertoire included both traditional and modern media, which he used in both old and new ways.¹ The shows he put on at the height of his fame in the 1910s and 1920s were not documentary films in the modern sense, but complex multimedia performances that he called ‘synchronized lecture entertainments’.² They used a combination of photographic exhibition, saturation newspaper coverage, the presence of a celebrity lecturer or ‘platform personality’, silent cinema projection, coloured glass lantern slides, live musical accompaniment, themed theatre decorations, and mainstream book publication, all ‘tied in’ to achieve maximum advertising exposure. The performances were entertaining as well as educational, drawing as much attention to their own attractions as to the events they purported to represent. There was about them a sense of self-promotion and opportunistic contrivance that sometimes attracted criticism: they smacked of what contemporary pressmen called stunts. Hurley’s shows toured Australia’s capital cities and regional towns and they often took place simultaneously overseas by arrangement with various entertainment agencies in New Zealand, Great Britain, Europe, the United States and Canada. They made Captain Frank Hurley a household name and earned him an international reputation.³

We are familiar with the *images* of Hurley’s professional life. His photographs of Douglas Mawson’s Australasian Antarctic Expedition, Ernest Shackleton’s Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition and the two World Wars have been so widely exhibited and reproduced that in many cases they are the principal means by which we have come to see those world-historical events. Hurley’s photographs of the men of Mawson’s expedition leaning on the wind; of Shackleton’s ship, *Endurance*, crushed by pack ice during the fateful winter of 1916; of shell-shocked diggers of the first Australian Imperial Force (AIF), whose eyes meet ours as they walk on duckboards from the smoking ruins of Chateau Wood...
in the winter of 1917 – these have become, in that overly used but still suggestive phrase, iconic images.

Four biographies record Hurley’s life and personality and his career as an adventurer-photographer. The most recent of them begins with an account of biographer Alasdair McGregor’s personal quest to ‘meet’ Hurley – his own voyage to Antarctica, his pilgrimage to Mawson’s hut, and his entry into Hurley’s old darkroom, where he encounters the ghostly traces of his subject:

And so we cut, dug and shovelled [away] ... decades of accumulated drift. ... The hut’s interior was gradually revealed, and the presence of its long-departed builders and occupants seemed to return to that chill space. As the expedition’s photographer, I naturally sensed the rather daunting presence of a young Hurley looking over my shoulder. ... The darkroom in particular seemed almost to ring with Hurley’s yelps of delight over his latest photographic triumph.

Perhaps biography really does begin, as Stephen Greenblatt once said of history, with a desire to speak with the dead. Yet despite their many strengths, in each of these books the voice of the biographer stands between us and Hurley. None of them grants us an intimate encounter with Hurley himself; the inner life of this complex man remains elusive.

Yet there is another source, so far little known to the public, that also gives us a startling sense of the presence of the past: it is Hurley’s voluminous manuscript diaries, only brief extracts from which have so far been published. Originally written in the field in Antarctica, South Georgia, England, France, the Middle East, Papua and Australia, and later raided and revised for his many publications and stage performances, they have survived years of world travel and are now carefully preserved in the archives of the National Library of Australia in Canberra and the Mitchell Library in Sydney. Alongside thousands of Hurley’s articles and advertisements, press notices, photographic illustrations, interviews and reviews clipped from hundreds of newspapers and magazines throughout the English-speaking world and pasted into his scrapbooks, they are now quietly crumbling to pieces, wrapped in acid-free paper and protective plastic. By republishing this illustrated edition of his diaries we hope to re-present Frank Hurley in his own words, explore his testimony to these significant events, and review the part he played in imagining them for an international as well as an Australian public.

A Life of Adventure and Controversy

James Francis (Frank) Hurley was born on 15 October 1885 in a single-story terrace house at 63 Derwent Street in Sydney’s Glebe. He ran away
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from the nearby public school at the age of 13 and found work in the Lithgow steel mills, where he began to acquire the mechanical skills that helped make him such a resourceful traveller. By the age of 20, he was a leading figure in local camera clubs and soon developed a reputation for sensational photography in Sydney’s competitive postcard industry. His first one-man exhibition was held in Kodak’s George Street salon in 1910. The following year, Douglas Mawson called him on to the stage of history when he invited him to serve as the official ‘camera artist’ on the Australasian Antarctic Expedition. Hurley’s film of the expedition, The Home of the Blizzard, whose earliest form dates from 1912, brought him international fame as an adventurer-photographer and cinematographer. After making a documentary of Francis Birtles’ expedition by car across Northern Australia, he was invited to join Sir Ernest Shackleton’s ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. The loss of the expedition’s ship, Endurance, and the epic story of the party’s survival and rescue, provided Hurley with photographic opportunities that made him a legend. In wartime London in 1916, he developed his film and photographs of the expedition, and learned something of the showman’s craft by attending performances of Hubert Ponting’s With Captain Scott in the Antarctic. Ponting’s synchronized lecture entertainment was based on Robert Falcon Scott’s fatal race for the Pole, and it gave Hurley a commercial format in which he could exploit his own expedition work.

Once again in the right place at the right time, Hurley was appointed an official photographer to the Australian Imperial Forces in France in June 1917. At the Third Battle of Ypres he won the respect of Australian soldiers for displays of great courage under fire as he attempted to capture an authentic experience of modern warfare. Hurley’s use of composite printing to convey this grand spectacle, which was otherwise impossible to capture under the combat conditions of the Western Front, drew him into conflict with the head of the Australian War Records section, Charles Bean, who openly favoured the work of his second photographer, Hubert Wilkins. One result of their conflict was that Hurley was sent to Palestine and the Middle East to capture the achievements of the Light Horse; another was that when he returned to London to exhibit this work in 1918, he was censured for ‘fakery’ and self-promotion and lost control of his images to the Australian War Museum, the organization that would later become the Australian War Memorial.

Hurley resigned from the AIF in indignation and returned to Sydney, determined to exploit commercially the photographs and films of his polar adventures. In 1919 he joined Ross and Keith Smith in their Vickers Vimy on the final Australian leg of their record-breaking flight from England to Australia. He then made two separate trips to the Torres Strait and Papua in the early 1920s to gather material for newspaper
articles, radio talks, lecture entertainments and documentary films. His handling of the indigenous population led him once again into conflict with officialdom, and he was accused by the Territorial Administration of stealing artefacts and intimidating the natives. As when he fell foul of the AIF, he used his celebrity and his contacts in the press to vent his spleen.

Following the success of his Melanesian travelogue, *Pearls and Savages*, in Australia, Great Britain and North America, Hurley ventured into feature filmmaking with *The Jungle Woman* and *The Hound of the Deep* (1926). When territory officials refused to let him return to Papua, he moved production to Dutch New Guinea and the Torres Strait. In 1927 he was briefly named pictorial editor for Sydney’s *Sun* newspaper. It was an era when the spectacle of flight was exciting the popular imagination and inspiring nationalist sentiment across the world, and Hurley tried – and failed – to fly from Australia to England. He was back in the saddle with Mawson at the end of the twenties when he joined the British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE), during which he shot the photograph of Mawson that was later used in the design for the first Australian $100 note. BANZARE was a scientific success but did not provide the stirring narrative of earlier polar expeditions. Nevertheless, Hurley produced *Southward Ho with Mawson and Siege of the South*, with which he toured in 1930 and 1931 until the Great Depression forced him to turn to short feature films for Greater Union cinemas. A stint as cameraman for Cinesound followed, and he worked on Ken G. Hall’s feature films, *The Squatter’s Daughter* (1933), *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1934), *Strike Me Lucky* (1934), *Grandad Rudd* (1935) and *Lovers and Luggers* (1937). New techniques from Hollywood increasingly moved production indoors and called for a softer focus, and Hurley was gradually supplanted by younger cameramen. He moved to short documentary film making for business and government, making *Silver City, Vulcan’s Crucible, Treasures of Katoomba* (1936) and *A Nation is Built* (1938).

The Second World War provided Hurley with another international event that he could conjure in images. He returned to his beloved Middle East, leaving from Sydney’s Rose Bay on 3 September 1940 aboard a Qantas Empire Airways flying boat, and landed nine days later on the Sea of Galilee in Palestine. As head of the Department of Information’s Photographic Unit, he covered the Australians’ fighting at Bardia, Tobruk and El Alamein, but his preference for bulky, old-fashioned camera equipment and high production values meant that it was the younger photographers Damien Parer and George Silk who made their reputations by getting in close to the action with their new 35mm single-lens reflex still cameras and light Eyemo movie cameras. Hurley found himself behind the times in North Africa, just as he had
when working at Cinesound in the 1930s. He covered Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies’s tour of the North African theatre en route to London in 1941 and then embarked on a number of nostalgic tours of Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. But Hurley’s penchant for travelogues failed to satisfy the demand of Australian cinema audiences for up-to-date news footage about the progress of the war. He left his Australian post to become Middle East Director of Army Features and Propaganda Films for the British Ministry of Information, and did not return to Australia until 1946.

Sledging Diary, the Australasian Antarctic Expedition (November 1912–January 1913)

The earliest of Hurley’s diaries known to have survived was written during Mawson’s Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) between 10 November 1912 and 10 January 1913. The AAE set out to map the depth of the ocean floor between Australia and Antarctica, conduct a scientific examination of the sub-Antarctic territory of Macquarie Island, and explore a two thousand mile stretch of uncharted Antarctic coast to the south of Australia. The expedition left Hobart on board the Aurora on 2 December 1911 and after a brief stop at Macquarie Island, landed the scientific party at Cape Denison, Commonwealth Bay, in January 1912. They spent the summer and autumn months establishing a winter camp and conducting scientific experiments while preparing for the following summer, when they would split up into sledging parties, exploring to the west, east and south.

Hurley was a member of the southern party, which gathered information on magnetic variation in proximity to the south magnetic pole. Mawson thought they could expect ‘the most adverse weather conditions’, for ‘they were to set their backs to the coast and traverse an icy desolation, an unbroken wilderness’, but it was the expedition leader’s own far-eastern party that met with disaster. Mawson’s sledging partner, Lieutenant Belgrave Ninnis, was lost in a crevasse with the best of the dogs and most of their provisions, while Dr Xavier Mertz died of starvation and exhaustion on the return trip. Mawson struggled back alone to Cape Denison, arriving a few hours after the relief ship had departed, and was forced to spend a second winter there. Hurley returned to Australia with Aurora in March and Dr Mawson’s Antarctic Film Series was shown in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth over the next few months. During the winter he took on an assignment in Java to promote tourism for the Royal Dutch Steam Packet Company, but rejoined Aurora when it departed Hobart for the relief of Mawson’s party on 13 December 1913.

Hurley’s diary concentrates on the search for the south magnetic pole with his sledging companions Robert Bage and Eric ‘Azzi’ Webb. Simply