

Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment. LINDA GORDON and GAR Y Y. OKIHIRO, eds. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. 205 p. ISBN 10-0-393-06073-X.

During the Second World War, the west coast of North America was peopled with persons of Japanese ancestry, mostly American and Canadian citizens by birth or naturalization. The hard-scrabble depression years had driven the ugly stake of “survival at all costs” through the natural broadmindedness of Americans and Canadians alike. On 7 December 1941, Imperial Japan’s lightning strike on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, plunged Canada (first, by a whisker) and then the United States into the Pacific War. Week by week, small pent-up pockets of bigotry and bile transformed themselves into an irrational torrent of fear and personal greed that swallowed up saner and more responsible citizens.

While the Japanese Imperial Fleet struck southward toward Australia, west-coast North American fear of its approximately one hundred and twenty thousand Japanese Americans and twenty thousand Japanese Canadians crackled as if the Japanese were headed for San Francisco or Victoria, BC. Historians from both countries use the word *internment* in its civilian sense to describe the chain of events following 7 December 1941: the forced removal of persons of Japanese ancestry from the coast to inland concentration camps. The late twentieth century has witnessed acknowledgement and redress in both countries.

For the American context, it is important to note the two fundamental constitutional differences that separate the American and the Canadian photographic legacy. First, Japanese Americans were interned by *Executive Order*

9066, signed by President Franklin Roosevelt on 19 February 1942, which gave the US military the power to “exclude” persons from particular areas and to provide all accommodations for this act of exclusion. In Canada, forced removal and *ad hoc* accommodation in British Columbian ghost towns were also federally conceived and closely stage-managed, yet remained essentially a civilian as opposed to a military operation. Second, the American Constitution included a *Bill of Rights*; Canada would entrench a *Charter of Rights* only forty years later when it repatriated its *Constitution*. These differences add a certain weight to the weft of the Japanese-American story of military persecution with constitutional sanction – in particular, one told by images.

Even though wartime-internment has left a bitter internal legacy of loss and grief in both countries for persons of Japanese ancestry, what remains are the physical images of the time. *Impounded: Dorothea Lange and the Censored Images of Japanese American Internment* recounts both the efforts of Dorothea Lange to capture the harsh realities of the Japanese American internment, as well as provides a historical context from which to view her images.

Lange, an influential American documentary photographer, is best known for her work for the Farm Security Administration (FSA): those stark images of the Great Depression that hollowed out human hearts and spewed them out as dust. Ironically, the forty-seven-year-old Lange was assigned by the federal War Relocation Authority (WRA) to create a photographic record of the forced 1942 military relocation that would showcase the banality of the whole operation.

Obviously critical of the American internment policy, Lange’s images were eventually impounded by the Army as not meeting the original aims of her assignment. The word “impounded” – scribbled and scratched over several of her prints – remains as archival evidence of her government’s betrayal of the enlightened polity she had come to value. None of her negatives were published during the Second World War. Later, they were quietly transferred into the vast holdings of the US National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, DC. Ninety-seven percent of the images remained unpublished until Linda Gordon, Professor of History, New York University, began researching a biography of Dorothea Lange. Together with one of the leading American scholars of American-Asian history, Gary Y. Okihiro, Professor of History and Director, Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, Columbia University, Gordon and Okihiro have brought the existence of Lange’s WRA work to our attention through the publication of her images and two splendid original essays.

Gordon explores Lange’s own conflicting views about photographs as documentary records in the context of turn-of-the-century American and European thought and political movements. On the one hand, Lange would state emphatically that:

[s]ocial reform is not the object of documentary photography Its power lies in the evidence it presents not in the photographer's conclusion for he is a witness to the situation not a propagandist or an advertiser A documentary photography [sic] has a responsibility of keeping the record and to keep it superbly well (p. 12).

Yet, Lange could also aver: "Everything is propaganda for what you believe in, actually, isn't it? . . . I don't see that it could be otherwise" (p. 12). The paradigm of the photograph as record or , as Gordon puts it, the outcome of a "myriad of manipulations" is left unresolved, but Gordon tells us that in her opinion, Lange's work is, in the end, "saturated with conviction" (p. 12).

Regardless of this unresolved issue of the photograph as a documentary record, it is clear that Lange's work is not a photographic trove recovered in isolation. The striking images of *Impounded* must be viewed alongside Ansel Adams's photographs of the Japanese American internment camp found in his 1944 publication *Born Free and Equal*¹ as well as in the 1989 republication of these images as *Manzanar: Photographs by Ansel Adams, Commentary by John Hersey*.² It is almost impossible to speak about Lange's images without conjuring Adams's.

They were both great photographers, known for other collections: Lange, for her documentary images of the Great Depression; Adams, for his stunning landscapes. Both were colleagues and friends who, with a healthy respect for moral and constitutional rights, used their artistry to document the plight of their fellow citizens, Lange, through her work for the WRA and Adams, through his documentation of the Manzanar War Relocation Center in 1943. For decades, both their sets of war negatives remained sequestered from public view. Adams, so wounded by the blistering reception of his photographs in 1944, donated all his negatives and prints to the Library of Congress, where they lay fallow until their republication in *Manzanar*.

Lange's images move like the works of today's photojournalists. Yet she eschewed 35mm cameras, which were held in front of the photographer's eyes in favour of waist-high cameras to see her image, so she "could spend most of her time looking at and talking to her subjects" (p. 19). She worked from on top of her car (stopped or moving) or from a small stepladder She asked permission of all her subjects, explaining she worked for the government and that she believed that a "true record of the evacuation would be a valuable record" (p. 19). Her camerawork caught the attention of the military brass overseeing the forced removal and she found herself in endless bureau-

1 & See the Library of Congress website, "Ansel Adams's Photographs of Japanese-American Internment at Manzanar," <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/anseladams> (accessed on 29 July 2008).

2 & John Armour and Peter Wright, *Manzanar: Photographs by Ansel Adams, Commentary by John Hersey* (New York, 1989).

cratic tussles while trying to photograph what she saw as a massive injustice in progress.

While Adams's images seem framed by the stillness of space, Lange's appear to hesitate the second before the image rushes into a continuing universe. Her black and white photographs seem to capture the emotion of the moment so much more readily than colour. There are no hues to distract one from the suspended moment. Lange's images of children in plaid, woolen coats, hands covering their hearts saying the Pledge of Allegiance, or the elderly grandfather with a number tag hanging from his coat resonate with military hysteria, bigotry, and a *Bill of Rights* in tatters.



Figure 1: “Centerville, California. A grandfather awaits evacuation bus. Evacuees of Japanese ancestry will be housed in War Relocation Authority centers for the duration,” 1942. National Archives and Records Administration, NWDNS-210-G-C219, and W.W. Norton & Company.

Gordon's essay about Lange and Okihiro's writings on the internment, paint the photographer and the internment with broad-brush strokes. The more we know about Lange, the more intense the images become, the more we sense the whirr of the camera in a river of movement. The more we know about the event, the more we see in each image the human record of indignity and injustice.

However, like many book-bound photo collections, *Impounded* suffers from the small size of the published image. These images need to be at least as large as those published in Adams's *Manzanar*. They really should be exhibition size, so that the viewer can feel the swirl of dust, the tired look of a small boy leaning against a suitcase filled to bursting, the comradeship of Caucasian and Japanese American boys swinging around to smile at Lange in the days leading up to Pearl Harbor.



Figure 2: “San Francisco, California. Lunch hour at the Raphael Weill Public School... 1942.³ National Archives and Records Administration, NWDNS-210-G-A72, and W.W. Norton & Company.

The bibliography, too, should include Frank Chuman's *The Bamboo People*⁴ and Peter Irons's *Justice at War*.⁵ Irons's book, in particular, uses archival sources and interviews to dissect the principal players in the bureaucracy and military who staged the American internment. Without the constitutional and archival documents, which have preserved the language and story of the internment, the richness of Lange's black and white images is diminished, and they lose some of their power and meaning. Despite this, *Impounded* is a thought-provoking and moving addition to Japanese American internment literature.

As noted, both Lange and Adams used their skills to document the reality of internment, refusing to be instruments of government propaganda. The surviving archival images created by American and Canadian government photographers reveal two very different choices.

In 1944–1945, photographer Jack Long was hired by the Canadian government to document the British Columbia interior shantytowns where Japanese Canadian women, children, the elderly, and sick were housed. His assignment was to make these tar shacks look as comfortable, and their internees as happy and as well treated as possible. Prime Minister Mackenzie King and his Cabinet wanted such images to show the Axis Japanese government, through the Red Cross and other neutral international agencies, that Canada was treating its “Japanese” civilians well, in hopes that this might provide a concomitant salutary effect on Canadian soldiers held by the Imperial Japanese war machine. Unlike Lange and Adams, Long did what was requested of him, and thus left behind a very different archival photographic legacy than the two Americans.

When one bureaucrat in Canada's Department of External Affairs saw Long's images he wrote on the file pocket: “These are excellent photographs.” But the written comments of another bureaucrat just below his colleague's comment leave us with a stark reminder of the reality of the situation not revealed by the photographs themselves: “Understand from some who have been there that this spot is actually pretty grim — very cold — no work except sawing wood — no schools — in fact not a very pleasant spot — for

3 The full caption for this photograph reads “San Francisco, California. Lunch hour at the Raphael Weill Public School, Geary and Buchanan Streets. Children of Japanese ancestry were evacuated with their parents to spend the duration in War Relocation Authority centers where educational facilities will be established.”

4 Frank F. Chuman, *The Bamboo People: The Law and Japanese-Americans* (Del Mar, CA, 1976). See also the Frank F. Chuman papers at the University of California, Los Angeles, <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf5g500758/?&query=Frank%20Chuman&query-join=&&brand=oac> (accessed on 29 July 2008).

5 Peter Irons, *Justice at War: The History of the Japanese American Internment Cases* (New York, 1983).

Canadian citizens where only offence is their colour.” Signed A.R.M. 26 April 1943.⁶ These are sentiments that would have appealed to Lange and Adams.

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⁶ & Library and Archives Canada, Record Group (RG) 25, Department of External Affairs, vol. 3006, file 3464-AN-40C, “Visits by various persons to Japanese internment camps and settlements in Canada – Arrangements and reports,” 19 April 1943. “A.R.M.” was Arthur Redpath Menzies, who went on to become Canada’s Head of Mission Japan (1950), Chargé d’Affaires ad interim (1952), High Commissioner Malaysia (1952), High Commissioner Australia (1965), High Commissioner Fiji (1970), Ambassador and Permanent Representative North Atlantic Council (1972), and Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary China and Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1976).