

Agents of Empire: How E.L. Mitchell's Photographs Shaped Australia. Joanna Sassoon. North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017. x, 260 pp.
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Agents of Empire: How E.L. Mitchell's Photographs Shaped Australia explores the life and work of Yorkshire-born photographer Ernest Lund Mitchell, whose widely reproduced images have shaped ideas about Australia for much of the past 100 years. This monograph is based on Joanna Sassoon's 2001 PhD dissertation and journal articles she has authored on Mitchell and his photographs. Sassoon, an internationally respected historian and archivist who has managed archival collections in Western Australia and Canberra, reveals that she was prompted to learn more about the enigmatic man behind the lens and the stories surrounding his images after identifying one of Mitchell's photographs in her grandfather's 1929 *Encyclopedia Britannica*. How and why did this image end up halfway across the world, and what can it tell us about the context in which it was created, circulated, and understood by generations across the British Empire? Drawing from rich archival sources and published material, Sassoon provides us with answers to these questions as she reconstructs the long lives of Mitchell's photographs from their moment of creation through to their archival afterlives. *Agents of Empire* presents a thoroughly researched narrative that illustrates how and why E.L. Mitchell's photographs became "emblematic of an Australian way of life" (p. x).

As Sassoon explains in her introduction, this biography takes the "form of a double helix": one strand charts Mitchell's life, while the other maps the long lives of his photographs to explain how and why they became embedded in the

“visual DNA of Empire” (p. ix). These two threads, she continues, converge from two perspectives: “firstly case studies track the long lives of photographs to reveal the active roles they played in shaping ideas about landscape and identities in Australia; and secondly the archival afterlives of his photographs show how they continue to influence present understandings of the past” (p. ix). The introduction clarifies that this book is not simply a biographical study of photographer E.L. Mitchell. Instead, its focus is primarily on his photographs themselves as “individual documents” and the multiple meanings they have accumulated, and continue to accumulate, over their lives.

The book is structured in a logical manner. The first half of Part I (Production), titled “Agent of Empire,” presents a biographical sketch of E.L. Mitchell, exploring his transition from a struggling itinerant photographer taking speculative photographs in New South Wales and Queensland to the leading commercial photographer in Western Australia after having built close relationships with his two major clients: the government and the pictorial press. Sassoon builds upon this biographical study in the second half of this section, analyzing the types of photographs that Mitchell produced based on geographical region, and how the development of his aesthetic style and the visual content of his images were influenced by his clients’ desires. These collections of photographs, she observes, “paint a reassuring picture of progress, order and consensus” while omitting aspects of communities’ “underlying politics,” despite the fact that Mitchell was working during a time of cultural change and increasing social conflict (p. 45). In short, Sassoon argues that the common aesthetic message conveyed through Mitchell’s photographs turned them into “ideal candidates to be used to shape ideas about Australia to encourage British migration” (p. 125).

In Part II (Reproduction), Sassoon explores how Mitchell’s photographs found their way into a network of local, national, and international photographic collections, in addition to the role they played as agents of Empire in building an “imaginative geography and landscape of Australia” (p. 217). In this section, Sassoon presents multiple case studies that track the lives of individual photographs from Mitchell’s studio, illustrating how their meanings changed from “being images of Western Australia” to “symbols and stereotypes of ‘Australia’ for audiences across the world” (p. 170). She studies the role that manipulation, such as cropping and retouching, played in reshaping the meaning of the photographs that she highlights, while also emphasizing the importance of accompanying text in the reading of these images. For example, Sassoon provides a

rich analysis of Mitchell's widely reproduced photograph "Nor'West Natives" (as it was originally captioned), illustrating how this one image was manipulated and published in newspapers, government publications, missionary postcards, anthropological literature, and school textbooks to communicate imperial ideas about Aboriginal peoples to audiences across the world.

Perhaps most relevant to an archival audience, Part III (Preservation) provides a history of the preservation and destruction of Mitchell's archive and how this has been shaped by the "ideas and values of the individuals who decided the fate of its contents" (p. 221). Sassoon traces the dispersal of Mitchell's photographs and personal records before and after his death, finding their way into public institutions and the hands of private individuals. Lamenting the fact that major photographic archives once containing Mitchell's photographs are either "incomplete or phantoms," Sassoon briefly recounts how she became committed to searching for answers to her questions elsewhere. She explains that the "unconventional sources" she was able to locate, including official stamps on the backs of prints, order books and captions in publications, helped her "eke stories from silences in the archive" (p. 242). These details shed light on the unique challenges that photo historians face when conducting research on a photographer and his/her work when all that remains is a "sliver of the original mass of documentation" (p. 221). While realizing that a more in-depth discussion of Sassoon's own research journey was omitted from this publication with the intent of targeting a more general audience, I still found myself wishing for more information about the specific challenges she had encountered as a researcher and how she was able to overcome them.

Throughout all three sections, Sassoon includes reproductions of Mitchell's photographs and captions them in a way that encourages readers to look beyond their visual content alone, adding more information about the historical contexts in which they were created. Reproducing images of the publications and newspapers in which his photographs are found also helps readers better understand the ways that Mitchell's photographs were manipulated, disseminated, and consumed by national and international audiences.

In the last pages of the biography, titled "Afterlives," Sassoon reflects on the management of Mitchell's photographic archive today. She points to the fact that those responsible for parts of Mitchell's personal archive did not always properly document provenance or chains of custody, and even destroyed seemingly "insignificant individual scraps of documentation," including original negative

boxes, resulting in the loss of their original order. These “vital, yet minute scraps of information,” Sassoon continues, “reveal the lives of individual images and help us to understand what each photograph *means*” (p. 244). Furthermore, she observes that the way Mitchell’s photographs have been “managed, documented and digitised by cultural institutions” places value on “their image content above the contexts in which the multiple photographs are found or their surviving material form” (p. 244). She is particularly critical of common digitization practices that reproduce the fronts of photographs, only revealing what they are *of*. Instead, Sassoon argues that “it is precisely the physical or textual traces on the photographic object, and information from its context which provides the evidence to understand what the photograph was designed to *do*” (p. 245).

Sassoon’s closing remarks include a brief moment of self-reflection, in which she acknowledges that she too has played a role in shaping the lives and meanings of Mitchell’s photographs. She reminds us that as custodians of archival collections, we appraise, arrange, process, describe, and digitize photographic records, which inevitably results in the destruction or obstruction of vital information required to understand their individual contexts of creation and dissemination. In carrying out these core archival functions, archivists play an essential role in moulding the “archival afterlives” of photographic records for both present and future generations.

Overall, this biography marks a valuable contribution to photography studies in Australia. As an exploration of intersections between the idea of nation, imagined geography, and photographic archives, *Agents of Empire* will captivate any reader, particularly photographic historians and archivists. Rather than present a conventional biography of a photographer and the aesthetic qualities of his work, Sassoon introduces a critical way of thinking about Mitchell’s photographs as “agents” of the Empire, each with its own history of production, reproduction, and preservation. More broadly, this study acknowledges that photographs are not mere visual images but “historical documents that have accumulated a range of meanings over their lives from the interactions between their content, the contexts in which they have been placed and used, and their photographic or published formats” (p. viii). It is precisely these meanings that have shaped, and continue to shape, how we read historical photographs today.