Auckland University 1941
gelatin silver print on paper mounted on card
The University of Auckland Art Collection.

Tramping in the Makarora Valley at the head of Lake Wanaka in Mount Aspiring National Park, George Chance was nearly blown away by wind getting this photograph: “It was a real storm. I'd come out of the Makarora Valley because it was raining and the wind was coming up because I was warned that it might get too strong. I had to go back to the car eventually and get one of my tent ropes to tie myself to a tree in order to be steady enough to take the picture. Everything that was available became a form of counterbalance to the wind – you will see – but the wind made it hard to hold the camera steady.”

Overleaf left: Untitled [The resting team, South Otago] 1932
gelatin silver print on paper mounted on card
George R. Chance Collection, on deposit in Hocken Photographs Collection.

Accepted for exhibition at the Salon Internationale d’Art Photographique in Paris in 1932, this is one of the most famous of George Chance’s photographs. Similar in composition to Labourer of the Field, this image balances the mass of the gum tree trunk with a pair of horses that have stopped work while scything hay, and are still in harness.

Overleaf right: Old Mud Hut, Otago Central, NZ
gelatin silver print on paper mounted on card
George R. Chance Collection, on deposit in Hocken Photographs Collection.

Remnants of Central Otago’s goldmining heritage include dwellings built from local materials such as mud brick and schist. With the line of poplars to screen off distance, attention is focused on the squat shape of the abandoned miner’s cottage balanced as a mass by the tree trunk in the foreground. Dilapidation is made picturesque by the piling up of broken furniture at interesting angles.
Moving to London in 1989, Chance was given a Thomson-Pilkard half-plate hand camera and tripod by his father and went on photographic excursions. Accompanied by his two younger brothers, he travelled twelve miles to the Epping Forest in Essex. All he could afford was a one-dollar camera containing two half-plates, but with this he managed to make his first two real photographs, one a study of trees and the other an “S” curved road with bridge. His photographic aesthetic, based on the conventions of nineteenth-century English and French landscape painting, was established.

In a recorded interview he described how as a young man he understood photography to be the most modern form of art:

Photography captured all the artifice done by my father. I tried panel painting, watercolours and even oil but my progress was too slow for my active mind. I attended art classes that took a year to teach you to do Black & White sketches of models of cows, circles and triangles – I assumed all the knowledge I knew was prepared to accept in weeks. That is what turned me to photography for my own artistic expression – I found that much more rapidly I could express the inherited quality of my father in a more modern direction.

Aesthetic photographers such as George Chance met and discussed photography at camera clubs that promoted this kind of pictorialism. Joining the local photographic club of 1902, where he was only fourteen, he left school the following year and found work using his photographic skills. First employed as an oiler, he quickly moved on to Houghton’s, a photographic manufacturing firm to work with cameras. By 1905 he had moved on to photography at the London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company in Regent Street, selecting their very fashionable clientele to purchase and use photographic equipment. Through the company’s reputation and his marketing of cheap cameras that introduced photography to the masses, Chance was able to buy photographic equipment. Through the contacts he had shifted to the London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company. His interest in lenses suggested that he would prosper at the New Zealand Photographic Company. After marrying Nellie Louise Chandler in 1912, he adapted the family home in Lynwood Avenue to make small darkrooms where he could pursue his photographic work. Photography would remain his passion, and the means for him to express his inherited artistic talent, until his death.

Having established his aesthetic in photography in England prior to emigrating, all he had to do in his adopted country was promote pictorialism’s acceptance, and apply his composition skills to the New Zealand context. Like other pictorialists, he sometimes “improved on Nature” but to avoid having to do extra work in the darkroom, he aimed at getting the perfect negative on the first place. Often this meant standing on his hunch, balancing on fences or tallying up branches to get the right composition through the lens of his cameras. As his skills improved, he took photographs from his exploding battery. Even so, sometimes he still had to get to work on the negative, sorting through bright areas and selecting parts of his subjects to incorporate into his prints. As his darkroom skills improved, he also learned how to create a grainy, textured effect that made his photographic prints look like etchings or lithographs. Sepia toning he achieved by bleaching in a ferrocyanide solution and redeveloping in a sodium sulphide bath.

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English, armed with a tripod in South Otago he could turn into pictiureque study lanes with overlapping trees by using the right angle, and derelict shacks became charming cottages with careful composition.

With the advent of tractors, nostalgia for a passing rural lifestyle ensured the popularity of his images of farmers working the land with home-drawn ploughs. He would sometimes introduce a linear or narrative quality to his subjects that has seen his work criticised for removing sentimentality. Prints such as ‘Trails of the Field, Water that goes upon the Rocks’, ‘The Sentinel of the Lake’, ‘A Way’s Edge and Rail of the Forest’ indicate that his romantic sensibility occasionally triumphed over literal descriptiveness when it came to titling prints for exhibition or publication.

George Chance developed a signature style that had mass appeal – over 30,000 prints sold during his lifetime. Strongly linked to an interwar cultural heritage of New Zealand that he had cultivated throughout his life, his work became unfashionable after the Second World War. During his lifetime, the personal and political elements of his life, the death of his wife led him to confine himself to an exhibition to a photographic entity. Yet it was the natural and cultural heritage of New Zealand that he had used to create the definitive imagery of pictiureque beauty. His photographs are now sought after again and valued for their local content as well as for the technical tricks that once made them so controversial. His achievement in drawing attention to the realm of aesthetics at a time of economic depression and war is remarkable, and his style continues to inspire pictiurists. His means may often have been used to improve our tastes, yet as the American photographer Henry Peach Robinson wrote in ‘Pictorial Effect in Photography’ in 1867: "The dodge, trick, and conjuration of any kind is open to the photo- grapher’s use…. It is his imperative duty to avoid the mean, the base and the sly, and to aim to elevate his subject… and to correct the imperfect. A great deal can be done and very beautiful pictures made, by a mixture of the real and the artificial.”

Linda Tyler
Director, Centre for New Zealand Art Research and Discovery, National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries, The University of Otago