IMAGES

Front: *The Storm, Lake Wanaka, NZ*
gelatin silver print on paper mounted on card
George R. Chance Collection, on deposit in Hocken Photographs 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 of the rain and the storm that was coming up because I was scared that I might get marooned there with the rivers rising and out I came… I couldn't resist the temptation of climbing down the bank and getting this effect that you see. I had to go back to my 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. Even then there is a certain amount of camera shake – you will see – but of course that might have been to its advantage. The cloud there was put in afterwards.

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 *Labourers 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.

Above: *Maori Maids at Rotorua*
gelatin silver print on paper mounted on card
George Chance Collection, on deposit in Hocken Photographs Collection.

Wearing feather korowai or cloak and piupiu or grass skirt over European dress, and arranged like bookends, these two smiling women seem to be as much on exhibition as the carved wharenui where they sit. In their long hair they wear the white-tipped tail feathers of the huia, the large wattle bird which became extinct in the 1920s after a fashion craze for its plumage decimated the population. Central to the composition are the pair of short poi which the woman on the right holds in her hand.

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.

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

Designed by Chicago-trained architect Roy Lippincott with Edward Billson, the clocktower building is seen here freshly constructed of reinforced concrete with Mt Somers stone facings. Originally criticised by the Education Board architect who didn't get the commission as "un-British and out of harmony with our national character", the building was described as "Maori Gothic" and ridiculed as resembling both a wedding cake and a cruet. Poet A.R.D. Fairburn even said that it would frighten old ladies in Albert Park. George Chance however obviously admired this feat of architectural bravura as distinctive amongst the University's buildings and has photographed it looking like a castle crowning the hill.

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THE GUS FISHER GALLERY

THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND NEW ZEALAND

George Chance & Improving on Nature

LIVERPOOL-BORN photographer George Chance (1885–1963) trained as an optician in England before emigrating to Dunedin in 1909. An enthusiast for pictorialism, a style of work that American photographer Alfred Stieglitz described in 1899 as the "bastard of science and art", Chance's prints are distinguished by their soft focus and gentle sepia tones.

Pictorialism arose in Europe in America in the last half of the nineteenth century in response to the marketing of cheap cameras that introduced photography to the masses. Chance was able to buy his first threepenny camera in 1897 at the age of twelve years. Made of cardboard and equipped with a pinhole lens, it came supplied with enough developer and fixer to process the one plate. It was the beginning of a long involvement with technique in photography.

Serious amateur photographers wanted to separate their own aesthetic work from the random results of the "point and shooters". In contrast to this "snapshot" work, pictorial photographers composed their images aesthetically like a painting, emphasising the role of craft in the production of the image. Pictorialism used craftsmanship to counter the argument that photography was an entirely mechanical medium.

Moving to London in 1899, Chance was given a Thornton-Pickard half-plate stand camera and tripod by his father and went on photographic excursions. Accompanied by his two younger brothers, he travelled twenty miles to the Epping Forest in Essex. All he could afford was one darkslide 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 pictorial 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 artistic desire in my thoughts – I tried pencil drawing, watercolours and even oil but my progress was too slow for my active mind – I attended art classes that took a year to train you to do Black & White sketches of models of cubes, circles and squares – I acquired all the knowledge I was prepared to accept in weeks – Then I turned to photography for my artistic expressions – Here I found that much more rapidly I could express the inherited quality of my father in a more modern direction.

Amateur photographers such as George Chance met and discussed photography at camera clubs that promoted this kind of pictorialism. Joining the local club in London when he was only fourteen, he left school the following year and found work using his photographic skills. First employed as an office boy, he quickly moved on to Houghton's, a photographic manufacturing firm to work with cameras. By 1905 he had shifted to the London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company in Regent Street assisting their very fashionable clientele to purchase and use photographic equipment. Through the contacts he made, he was invited to join the Talbot Clifton expedition as secretary/photographer, sailing to Panama to search for lost treasure. While on his fourteen-month sojourn he also visited Ecuador, and took photographs of the revolutionary uprising there.

Returning to London, he resigned from the Photographic Company. His interest in lenses suggested a more stable vocation as an optician, the profession that brought him to New Zealand to work for Dawson's in Dunedin. After marrying Nellie Louise Chandler in 1912, he adapted the family home in Lynwood Avenue to include a darkroom so he could process and print his own work. Photography would remain his passion, and the means for him to express his inherited artistic talent, until his death fifty years later.

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 in the first place. Often this meant standing on his car, balancing on fences or tidying up branches to get the composition through his viewfinder right before he took his photographs. Even so, sometimes he still had to get to work on the negative, toning down bright areas with methylated spirits or bringing up texture on tree trunks with a pencil. Deploying his extensive library of catalogued cloud studies, he could change the mood of his image by adding a sunset sky or darken it with a storm cloud. All these approaches horrified purists who felt truth to nature was the aim in photography.

Often it was his home-made quarter plate box camera and tripod that he took out into the field, photographing with the lens stopped down to f/16 or f/22. Coming home to process his day's work, he would choose the image that needed the least retouching and then print it on warm-toned bromide photographic paper. Operating his own vertical enlarger with a foot switch, he used both his hands to control the printing, gesturing as if conducting an orchestra, and using the beat of a metronome to time his exposures. With a screen between the enlarger and the paper, he was able 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.

Travelling to England and Japan on a buying trip for Dawsons in 1920, he updated his knowledge of lenses and optics and was awarded a silver plaque in the Royal Photographic Society's Colonial Competition and Exhibition in London. Returning to New Zealand, he was elected President of the Dunedin Photographic Society and held solo exhibitions of his work in Christchurch and Wellington. Insisting on the distinction between an ordinary photograph and his own "camera studies", he continued to be a tireless champion of photography as art. Due to his efforts, an annex was added to the design of the Art Gallery at the New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition in Logan Park in 1925 to display a Salon of Photography – the country's first.

By 1932, the Otago Art Society had accepted pictorial photographers as full working members and the following year, they elected George Chance as President. Successful in gaining acceptance for pictorialist photography locally, he extended his influence to the national art exhibition arena, becoming President of the New Zealand Association of Art Societies and chairing the Fine Arts Committee for the Centennial Exhibition in Wellington in 1940.

During the Depression, George Chance photographs of rural idylls, buildings and the coast had become well-known through publication in magazines and newspapers such as the *Weekly News* and *Brett's Christmas Annual*. For three years in succession during the early years of the Second World War, he produced *The New Zealand Highways and Byways Calendars* for Coulls Somerville Wilkie in Dunedin using one of the first photogravure presses to be imported into New Zealand. Rural landscape photography had enormous appeal as the country urbanised and mass distribution of these calendars ensured a high degree of national recognition for George Chance's style of photography.

Overseas, his photographs were also successful. Considered unrivalled for his ability to conjure a sense of mood and atmosphere by emphasising changing weather effects and dramatic light, George Chance's work was exhibited at the Royal Photographic Society in London and the Salon Internationale d'Art Photographique in Paris. That he consistently won prizes locally and in the Northern Hemisphere success is not surprising. His work was technically excellent, and also characterised the features in the New Zealand landscape and architecture that seemed the most

English. Rutted tracks in South Otago could be turned into picturesque shady lanes with overhanging 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 horse-drawn ploughs. He would also sometimes introduce a literary or narrative quality to his subjects that has seen his work criticised for contrived sentimentality. Prints such as *Toilers of the Field*, *Waves that beat upon the Rocks, The Sentinels of the Lake*, *A Wayside Chat* and *Relics 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 era of allegiance to English artistic precedent, his work became unfashionable after the Second World War. In 1952, the personal tragedy of the death of his wife led to him ceasing to work as a photographer entirely. Yet it was the natural and cultural heritage of New Zealand that he had used to create the definitive imagery of picturesque 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 epitomise pictorialism. His means may often have been to improve on nature to his own ends, but as the American photographer Henry Peach Robinson wrote in *Pictorial Effect in Photography* in 1867: "Any dodge, trick and conjuration of any kind is open to the photographer's use.… It is his imperative duty to avoid the mean, the base and the ugly, and to aim to elevate his subject… and to correct the unpicturesque.… A great deal can be done and very beautiful pictures made, by a mixture of the real and the artificial."

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