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PRESERVATION PHOTOGRAPHY

CONVERSATION WITH BEN MCLENNAN IN CAPE TOWN 11/86

I left school. And I had difficulty finding a job. The first job I actually applied for was on the "Daily Dispatch" in East London as a cub reporter under Donald Woods. He was still here at that time. I worked as a reporter for several months. I wasn't very good at it then. Schooling in South Africa being high school. I left high school and then I matriculated. Went to work for the Daily Dispatch as a reporter. I wasn't very good at it. And after a few months, one of two staff photographers left, resigned. They were desperate to find somebody else. And I had once volunteered to cover a boxing match in black areas where the other photographers had refused to go for fear of being stoned. I was in East London. I was given the job. I had never developed a roll of film myself in my life before. I had taken possibly four or five rolls of 35mm film with a proper 35, except for an instamatic when I was a kid. And I learned the beginnings of photography on the Daily Dispatch in London.

From there, I went to University for a year in Grahamstown. I dropped out. I was studying journalism.

The following year I went up to Rhodesia. I went in 1977 to Rhodesia as a trainee photographer on the "Rhodesia Herald", which is where I learned a lot more about photography and the techniques of news photography, particularly from a fellow named Paul Harris, for a while before he was deported. And from, briefly, but very nicely from a fellow named Ross Boerman. I worked there for a year and enjoyed it. And then came back to South Africa and since then I have been working on various newspapers, including the "Eastern Province Herald" in Port Elizabeth and Grahamstown which is my hometown.

I worked on the Sunday Post in Johannesburg up until the time it was closed down. None of these were ever as a photographer. It was always as a journalist taking pictures occasionally. While I was in Grahamstown working for the "Eastern Province Herald" and during the year that I was teaching in Grahamstown in the department of journalism, I did a series of photographs of the Ciskei, of resettlement camps in the Ciskei. The first series of photographs would have been done in 1979, while I was working for the "Eastern Province Herald" and covering removals for the newspaper.

I left Grahamstown and came back again in about 1982 which is when I taught news writing at Rhodes University for a year. And did another series of photographs of resettlement camps in the Ciskei. These were done in conjunction with the Surplus People's Project, the SPP. Some of these photographs were published in the Eastern Cape volume of the SPP report.

Are there any other books or publications that you want to have mentioned?

I had photographs included in a national exhibition, I think it was called "Young Photographers", in 1983. It was mounted by the S.A. National Gallery and Toured South Africa. I also had photographs published in "nothing will separate us."

When I was working on the newspapers, I was being trained on the mechanics of how to use a camera and develop film. I haven't taken any photographs for quite some time now. I see myself as a journalist mainly. I feel a commitment towards what I cover. I certainly don't see myself primarily as a photographer. I haven't got the dedication that Omar Badsha has got to the cause of photography, in addition to the cause of the struggle in South Africa. Photography is very much an extension of my skills as a journalist. Most of my photography, except for that SPP exhibit, has been in conjunction with news reporting, with journalism, with putting things in magazines and newspapers everyday, and trying to tell people --

Alex: ...what you are trying to say is that photography grew out of another type of dedication that you had, that was so much broader...Photography growing out of a commitment to a struggle?

I don't, photography for me is very much a tool to specific end. I don't family snaps and I don't take photographs of dead trees and beautiful stones. It is a very functional thing geared to a purpose.

Perhaps this is a very trite thing to say, but I feel that there is a need for change in this country. There are a lot of injustices in this country, this is particularly relating to the things that I am doing, there are a lot of things that horrify me, and shock me that I have seen. In particular, the work in the resettlement camps that I did, that I found horrifying at times. In this context, photography and my newspaper articles almost always have gone together, been a means of recording, and where possible, of publishing this information and getting this information to a wider audience.

I think it is partly because one day when something happens and something changes in South Africa, people won't be able to, to insure that people won't be able to say we didn't know, we weren't told that these things were happening. It is partly this function, and partly a historical record. I look back at photographs that were taken in South Africa of very mundane things, the compound pictures, in early part of the century. I found absolutely fascinating of Chinese labor. Photographs of compounds taken by Nat, Nat Cole. I found those absolutely fascinating as well, and I discovered that some of the compound pictures which I've taken, Nat Cole went to those compounds when people were living in them as miners. I went to them when the mines had closed down, some of them were being rented out to other organizations and some of the compounds had been abandoned altogether. And recording those processes, as far as historical processes go.

Question: Did you grow up aware that something was not right in this country?

I grew up mostly in Grahamstown. I grew up in a fairly liberal family. My father was a university lecturer and my mother a librarian and now a member of the Black Sash. There was a lot of protests going on at the university that when I was still in high school I went to go along and watch processes against all kinds of things like detentions, and bannings and things like that. Although I went along,

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I had no political consciousness as such. This was when I was 13, 14, 15, 16. Even after I left school for several years, I think I was still very naive. I knew more or less what was right and what was wrong.

I think the first great change in awareness came when I took up a reporting job in Grahamstown in 1978 with "Eastern Province Herald." I was doing a lot of the normal small town branch correspondences, car accidents, magistrates court and stuff, and then it was announced they were going to move people from the coast near Grahamstown to Glenmore which was a resettlement camp in the Ciskei now far from Grahamstown. And at that stage, I am sure I did know exactly what resettlement was. I covered that move. I went down to the coast to a place called Klipfontein and talked to the people there. I had no political awareness. I wasn't particularly committed to their cause, I wasn't really aware that they had a cause. But following that move, from talking to the people, from following the move through to Glenmore, from listening to officials and the contrast from what the officials said and what the people who had to move said, and from going to the camp afterwards and talking again to the people who were there, and watching the incredible suffering, the incredible hardships. Talking to a family whose child would be coughing on the floor one day, and the next day would be dead. That conscientized me. That I found sometimes a very distressing experience and I've gone back to that camp again and again to take pictures.

But Grahamstown was also, although I didn't realize at the time, it is a good place for a white South African child to grow up. Grahamstown is so incredibly small, that the white half of town and the black half of town, is like a ragged edge between the two. You can stand in white Grahamstown and you have to see the black half of town. You can't do that in Johannesburg. You can avoid it in Cape Town. You have beggars coming to your door every day. You've got people without food. You've got a constant stream of people looking for jobs. From the age of ten to eighteen I saw this. You've got black people in town, shopping in the shops. In Cape Town, the shopping centers which could be classed as largely white shopping centers, mostly white people shopping in it. But in Grahamstown everything is so close, and I use to visit people in the black section.

Part of growing up in Grahamstown and being so close to the township and seeing the poverty of the people in Grahamstown. There were people crammed into backyards, because there was moratorium on housing for something like ten years in Grahamstown because they wanted to move everybody to a place near, they wanted to resettle the black people of Grahamstown, they wanted to cut off the black half of Grahamstown, move it 40 kilometers into the Ciskei and have people commute everyday. So they froze all the housing, they wouldn't allow any new houses for blacks and there were people crammed into people's backyard. I remember going into backyard one day taking a photograph for a newspaper article of two women who were living in a rainwater tank which had been turned on its side and they put one bed in it which was all that fit and they slept in the bed.

We had a succession of gardeners, black people. We had a domestic

worker who was with us for many years. Mrs. Lilian Dreely, I am very sorry that I didn't get to know her as well as I should of at the time. It was only afterwards that I discovered It was an interesting situation. My mother being a committed member of the Black Sash, a women with a conscience working through the Black Sash, which is largely white, upper middle class women working for social change in South Africa. Lilian Dreely, who was very much a working class woman, who in her youth had marched on in protest against the pass laws in Grahamstown, and the two women, both marvelous people didn't ... it was a master-servant relationship. They didn't connect on the political level at all. That is just what growing up and being in South Africa is like. It is neither one of their faults in any way. But that is just what their situation does to them.

Alex : did your work as a journalist begin to change once you saw the resettlement situation.

yes it did. Covering the move made me more politically aware. It made me more politically active. It made me more aware that there are causes for which one could fight. Cause for which one could work for. It made me aware that both journalism and photography could be used as tools that they could be used as tools for this cause.

Immediately after the Glenmore move, I spent a year on Sunday Post in Johannesburg which was another further step in that process. The Sunday Post at that time was very pro-ANC. It was a further step in the education of a relatively naive small town boy.

I work now for the South African Press Association which is a news agency. I am a political reporter, I work in parliament doing largely mechanical reports of speeches for six months of the year. The other six months, party congresses. It is not a job in which a person can exercise a great deal of political commitment.

It has opened up another fascinating area, to watch white politics. Especially at this time. I joined just as the three chamber parliament got under way, just as the new constitution came into operation. The one thing that sticks in my mind above all after a whole year working as a political reporter is just how wasteful the whole system is starting with the Westminster system of Parliament. How much time and energy that people can put into something and manage to come out with something of so little value

What are your feelings about the differences between South African photographers and outsiders looking on the country. Is it important to have a commitment?

I have an American passport. My mother was American. I lived in the states for one year, when I was one year old. She is from Ohio, Cleveland, but I have never been back. I keep the American passport for convenience mainly, for travel.

I don't know. Commitment, I think I have actually admired the commitment of most of the foreign journalists that I have seen. In Cape Town over the last couple of months there has been a lot of

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unrest. [I have been watching some of the foreign journalists who have been covering what has been happening. They are showing a lot more courage, and a lot more commitment than most sections of the South Africa media. As for knowledge, for not growing up in South Africa, I think they -- to come into South Africa with that new courage, that new awareness of what is unjust, is a marvelous thing. To actually come in and learn what is happening, to learn what is unjust, and to know what is there and expose it, to have that energy is marvelous.]

Louise Germann-- worked with an agency in New York. I knew from Rhodesia. She's doing commissions and she is here off and on. Of the photographers, she has shown as much commitment and she has been in the right places as often as any of the local photographers. As for the the local newspapers, there are a handful of freelancers who live in Cape Town and who work in Cape Town. There are the local newspapers. These three main ones. The Burger, the afrikaans one, doesn't cover certain situations. If they did, they would get stoned or thrown out of town. The Cape Town, the Argus... well I better not say that.

Alex: I have been reading your lovely Sunday paper, more like the British...

One thing that I do think that is urgently necessary in South Africa now is a project which Omar talked about at one stage which, in the way that Omar does, that is of starting, in the context of photography, [is starting up workshops for black people in the townships. Very basic workshops. Perhaps with a communal camera. A room that can be used as a darkroom. Doesn't have to be in the townships but perhaps that would help. A room just to be shown how, how a camera functions, how to develop and print a film and perhaps some rough guidelines on what a dramatic photograph looks like. The areas at the moment which the police can close off under the emergency regulations, they don't allow anyone in except for residents of the area. Outsiders including journalists who go in are immediately prosecuted. There was a T.V. cameraman the other day who got convicted for going in the township area.]

And I think if there were people who were living in those areas in every black township there were two or three people who knew how to use a camera and record what is happening and get prints out and who could get results even to the TV and the local newspapers..

You had to sneak into the compounds where you photographed?

On one occasion the guards were drunk. The compound was boxed in, four thousand people there, I can't remember the number, and the only entrance is through one narrow door which is guarded day and night. On one occasion I simply walked in when the guards were doing something else. I was thrown out after a half an hour. Another occasion, I went in and the guards were drunk and on the final occasion I actually went through an official channel -- permission for one visit after filling out various forms. An no permission for further visits after that.

Alex: How would people react to you just walking around and talking to people? Many of your photographs are extremely intimate for just walking in the door one day.

[I think part of the reason, if you look at the photographs you will see part of the reason, that those people were crammed together in such extraordinary conditions that had no privacy. The only privacy that had was the dubious privacy of a one foot by six foot concrete bunk. That was all they could call their own. Most of them just ignored me, they had so many people around them, they had such incredible appalling conditions. I was nothing. I wasn't even a curiosity. I would walk into rooms, there would be people singing. There would be a man singing, but sitting in a room by himself with a guitar. Singing songs about Zululand, about the hills, about the grass and the sky, about women, I would walk in a take photographs. He would look at me, carry on, and I would walk out again, I would walk in and a person would be lying on a bunk and I would ask if I could take his photograph. And he would say sure. And he would lie there and I would take his photograph and walk out.]

Alex: So it was never a question of getting to know people that well, you simply moved through it fairly freely.

Yeah, but there were certain people that, [I talked to people where I could, but there was a big language barrier. Most of them were Zulus, migrant workers. There were people that I talked to again and again. It was difficult. I think they were aware that I was a friendly force. It is very difficult to define that relationship. I felt at home in there. I didn't feel that I was, I didn't feel that there was any wall between them and me. They weren't opening up to me or any deep conversations, but they were at the same time allowing me into their communal lives. I don't know.] There was one guy,...

There was one guy who said would you take a photograph of me, and I said, o.k. and he took out a snapshot he had of himself and he stood against the cupboard, he held the snapshot up against his chest. He struck a pose and he put his elbow up on his hip. He said, "okay take it," I found that whole compound series a very moving experience. I found those men very moving, the fact that they managed to be maintain humanity and some measure of sanity under those conditions very very impressive.

The other nice thing that happened to me was, I think on the third visit, I was sitting watching some people eating in the compound, and I had the camera around my neck, and a fellow with a polaroid came up to me and said are you a photographer. He said, I am a photographer too. Should I show you my pictures. And he pulled out a box of polaroid instant camera pictures. He was a professional photographer. He would come into the compound and people would pay him a rand to take a picture that they would send home. He had a sheaf of pictures which he collected for some reason. Possibly people didn't pay for them. They were the most marvelous pictures. I wish I could have taken pictures like that. The fellow I told you about who posed with his own photograph was approaching that, but these were photographs that the model, that the people wanted to be photographed. They had chosen the ground, they had chosen the props, the radio, the hats, the

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newspaper, the clothing, the pose, everything. They were marvelous. This fellow had clicked the shutter. They were self-portraits in a way. This was a black guy.

Do you want to know about the resettlement photographs? The ones in the book, were taken at Kamaskrall that was, I have covered other moves before, I have covered force removals which were forced in every sense of the word, in which journalists were actually excluded from the sight, from both sights, from where people were being moved from and where people were being moved to. Where the police have forcibly excluded the journalists and not allowed anyone in. Kamaskraal was a little different because the move was from a site in the Ciskei, a nominally independent homeland, to another site in the Ciskei and the people were told they were going to better homes. Which in this case was true. They had been forceably moved to the first site, where they had been dumped in tents, and been left in tents for several years, and they were being moved to a place where they were being given two room flat shacks, prefabricated, with a tin toilet in a bush out in the back, and a tap outside. So you could say they were being moved to a better place.

The move was not as traumatic as some of the other moves I have covered. I was not prevented from wandering around during the removal and covering and photographing what was happening. Because the move, although when we got to the destination, that place called Pedi, which was close to a Ciskeian police station, A carload of Ciskian policemen did soon arrive. We did not know if they were going to through us out, but I thought for safety sake, I basically pretended to be one of the handful of church relief workers who was walking around distributing blankets. And I hid a camera underneath a poncho, it was raining at the time. The police suspected me, they hadn't seen the camera, but I hadn't looked very religious. And a policeman was following me at a distance of fifty yards, so I would have to walk towards something or stand in front of something, and make a small opening in the poncho and take a photograph through it, or put the poncho over my head and take a photograph. It was not easy.

Alex: And those people who were actually being moved were very open to you or sort of ignored you in a certain way?

Even though they were being told that they were moving to better homes, I think the move was very traumatic. That valley was absolutely extraordinary. There were cattle lowing that were being driven to trucks, there were children crying, there were people shouting to each other, there was an extraordinarily din of people who were put up in shacks, who were bashing the shacks down to take the tins with them, to salvage it, to take to their new homes. The goverment lorries were revving up in the valley. People would be busy doing that, they would take no notice of me.

When they had finished, they would be sitting in the veld. (There is one photograph I remember of a women, and a man, and a child with a cupboard, a stool, two bundles of belongings and a handful of pots and that was their house. They had some tin stacked up in a corner, that was all they owned. and they were sitting there waiting for the

lorries. I have never seen anyone suffer from shell shock, but they were just close to it.

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