

S. C. SMITH

This photograph is from a series which Smith took covering the sinking of the s.s. Penguin in Cook Strait in 1909. These are considered to be amongst his earliest photographs and probably pin point his commitment to photography. This print was used in *The Wreck of the Penguin* by Bruce Collins. S. C. Smith collection, Alexander Turnbull Library G20153 1/1. It shows wreckage strewn along a beach near the mouth of the Karori Stream.

In an age when daily newspapers seldom carried photographs in their columns of text, a handful of photographers were involved in catering for the public's desire to see pictures of happenings within their community by supplying 'Real Photo Postcards'. These not only served to keep people informed of events but also served as a cheap way of keeping in touch with friends and relatives. Nearly every New Zealand community had someone who made a feature of this during their career. For example, W. Beattie and F. G. Radcliffe were very active in this specialised trade in Auckland, while F. N. Jones maintained a lively business in Nelson. Two outstanding photographers featured in this speciality in Wellington. They were Joseph Zacharia and S. C. Smith. While Zacharia has more or less been put on a pedestal for his efforts in this direction, Sydney Charles Smith [1888-1972] has been passed over until quite recently.

Those who know me and my writings, will understand when I say I must take some blame for this situation, because I have on several occasions gone out of my way to praise 'Zak' in several of my publications. But as new material comes to light, it is fitting that the spotlight should focus on Smith who grows in stature as more material comes to light. First let me set the scene.

While there were some weekly publications and magazines that could handle photographs with columns of text in the late 1890s, it was still a couple of decades away from a more universal usage of photographs in newspapers when a young man called Smith took a fancy to photography. How he drifted into photography is not clear. But when work under his name began to appear, it was of necessity low key because he seems to have eased himself into photography between various jobs.

During this period, he seems to have become known to one or two established photographers like Arthur Schaefer and Joseph Zacharia who used him from time to time as an assistant on important occasions like the celebrations in Wellington that accompanied the declaration of New Zealand becoming a Dominion on the 26th

September 1907. Nearly two years later, he was on hand to photograph bodies coming ashore in Cook Strait from the wreck of the *Penguin* on the morning after the boat was wrecked on the 12th February 1909 when he would have been about 20 years old. A photograph of this tragedy was printed under his name in the *Weekly Press*. A better assessment of his pictorial contribution to this disaster is to be seen in a book called *The Wreck of the Penguin* (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). These in turn came from the Alexander Turnbull Library which has a major holding of his negatives.

Events of this magnitude, meant high activity for anyone in the business of producing 'real photo' postcards. Gradually, as the clamour for images in this format died down, sales would plummet until the next sensation took centre stage. In between these times, photographers like Smith could be gainfully employed by updating views of their town or city for representatives from publishers who were always on the look out for topical material. It is known Smith had a contract with Tanner Bros., a firm that specialised in mass produced editions of postcards. Generally speaking, these were printed overseas because local printers could not handle quality half tone reproduction which only came from offset lithographic presses.

The cameras which Smith used were wide and varied as was demonstrated in the early 1970s when the late Bruce Watt bought up many lots from Smith's estate at an auction that was held in Lower Hutt. Whole and half plate Graflexes and a Circuit were two that I targeted when Bruce and I subsequently came to doing a deal. These cameras are now deposited with Te Papa.

From memory there were others from view cameras down to small quarter plate hand cameras. Many were modified as I recall. Sorry to say, I don't think Bruce ever got around to sorting them into any order with a view to featuring them in his museum that was above his shop in Palmerston North.

In May 1999, I heard that a number of lots from a freshly

discovered assortment of Smith material was coming up for sale in Wellington. Included were two 35mm cameras which bore Smith's name in the form of crude sticking plaster labels bearing his address. They were a Contax and a Leica. Knowing how important it would be to see them secured for posterity, I put up the money to buy them and then asked PCANZ if they in turn would like to buy them and deposit them with the Centre. They agreed to this and they are now deposited with the Centre on a 'Long Loan' basis. With this debt of gratitude in mind I have negotiated copies of the NZ *Journal of Photography* which first featured the find in its columns.

The ink had hardly dried on the PCANZ cheque, when I was advised by a member of PCANZ, Adrian Ryan, that some S. C. Smith glass plate negatives had been located in a dealer's warehouse. These turned out to be fourteen half plates featuring views of Wellington dated around 1921. After these had been secured, I made inquiries how these plates had become separated from the main collection.

It seems that sometime towards the end of his life, Smith became a 'Maggie', acquiring all sorts of bits and pieces which he dumped higgledy-piggledy on his property. Included amongst these were several vintage motor cycles and bits of machinery which his executors had the good sense to see were put into the hands of various enthusiasts. Evidently it took time to clear the property and these Wellington views could easily have been put into a box and sold to a dealer who had an eye for something else.

As for the bulk of his negatives, I was told an interesting story which may or may not be true.

As Smith aged he had a spell in Hutt hospital. Alongside him in the ward where he was nursed was Jim Henderson of Radio NZ 'Open Country' fame. They evidently got talking one day and from this it emerged that Smith was worried about the fate of his negatives. Henderson said he'd mention it to a friend in the Turnbull and eventually they negotiated a transaction which saw them into their care. Over the years, these have gradually been contact printed and put into their pictorial reference files, were the public may look at them and order prints.

It took several years for the Turnbull to realise what a treasure trove they'd acquired. Eventually in the early 1980s, they released a folio of six Wellington images dating from 1910-1914. These sold well and an extra printing had to be made. I know this from my own experience because when I left the Polytechnic and opened my little gallery in Ghuznee street called 'Exposures', this folio was one of my best sellers.

We reprint John Sullivan's text which accompanied the folio with his permission.

Photographs bearing the name S. C. Smith began appearing in illustrated magazines around 1909. Over the next 50 years few areas of New Zealand escaped this photographer's lens, his work appearing in periodicals, postcards and calendars as well as Named prints. In view of the duration and geographical scope of the operation, one could be forgiven for assuming that this was a large studio employing a sizable staff. In fact, S. C. Smith was a one man operation, who worked mostly from his home and who was seldom able to practise photography full time.

Sydney Charles Smith was born in Woodville in 1888, the son of a hairdresser. The family moved to Wellington in the 1890s, settling in Berhampore. After leaving school he worked for some time in the grocery trade, but an interest in photography seems to have already developed and in 1909 he established a studio in Riddiford Street, Newtown, which he occupied until 1914. Apart from brief sojourns in Willis Street and Featherston Street, and a brief partnership with Arthur Schaefer in a studio in Vivian Street in the early 1930s, he was henceforth to work from his home. Much of his business derived from press work. He regularly contributed photographs to the dailies in the four main centres, as well as to the major pictorial weeklies. During World War One he was the Wellington photographic representative of the Otago Witness and the Christchurch Press, and he was also a press photographer for the Weekly News. His work in this period included extensive coverage of the Penguin shipwreck of 1909 and the general strike of 1913, and he was on hand to record all of Wellington's public festivities, such as the annual Dominion Day celebrations in Newtown Park. He also produced postcards and calendars, and to this end produced an extensive range of urban and rural scenes from both islands. From the beginning he enjoyed good relations with the military establishment, and he has left many views of Trentham and Fort Dorset army camps, as well as some delightful images of the naval camp at Mahanga Bay, Wellington.

Photography was not his only occupation. During World War One he worked as a conductor and driver on the Wellington trams, and throughout the 1920s and 1930s he supplemented his income by commercial fishing

from an open boat which he kept at Lyall Bay. He was interested in long line fishing and whale chasing, and many fine photographs of Cook Strait and Lyall Bay stem from this activity.

He was also a keen motorcyclist. He purchased his first, a Royal Enfield, in 1908, and his sidecar combinations are often to be seen in the foreground of his photographs.

S C Smith continued in business into the 1960s, still using dry-plate glass negatives alongside 35mm film. On his death in 1972, 4500 glass plates were deposited with the Alexander Turnbull Library. These date from the commencement of his business until the 1950s, and they form a fitting memorial to one of our more enterprising and prolific commercial photographers.

John Sullivan

Smith's modus operandi it seems in getting so many fine street scenes of Wellington for his postcard series, is worthy of analysis. Having decided the best position for his camera, he would erect a step ladder that had a special device for his camera (see advertisement and supporting photograph). It has been calculated that this gave him an elevation of approximately two metres above road level. Negatives made in this manner, have a wonderful foreground which leads the viewer into the picture.

Another requirement it seems was he preferred taking pictures on an overcast day. This gave less trouble in trying to get details in shadow areas as well as fewer difficulties with highlights that could prove troublesome when making a print. Support for this theory is evidenced in the fact that only one out of fourteen plates in the Centre's collection has a hint of sunlight.

All that remained was for him to print off his editions of 'real photo' postcards for sale across the counter or to sell them to agents who handled his work.

The challenge for any postcard collector who might see this article would be to locate one of the original postcards and match it up with the view illustrated with this article which is reproduced utilising all of the negative. The differences could be quite striking. When one examines the position of the titles which Smith painstakingly hand lettered onto his negatives, they are positioned well in from the bottom edge of the image. This was not a mistake but a deliberate ploy to eliminate some of the uninteresting foreground, giving as it did a sort of telephoto condensation, which gives an attraction to the depiction. Of course he could still resort to using the whole image if required for other purpose like sending off contact prints to various publishers around the country for use in their publications.

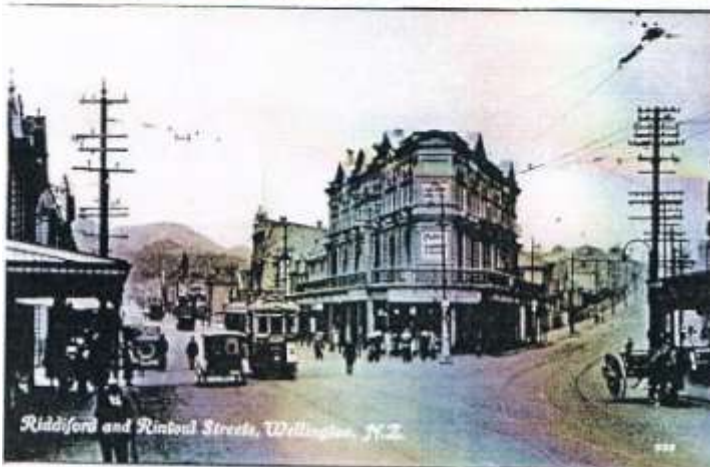
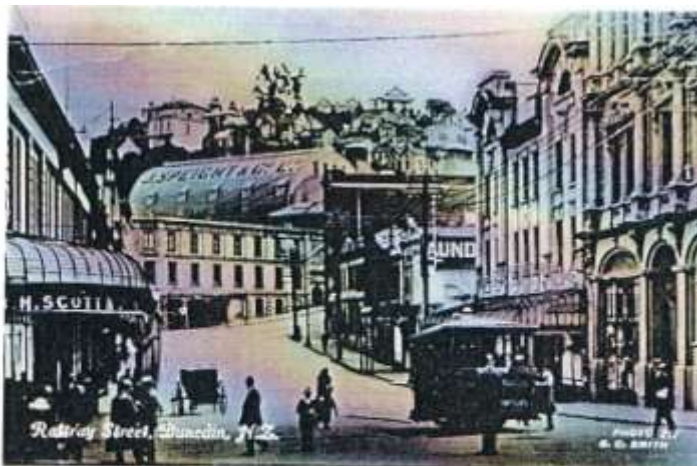
As we go to press, the NZ Centre for Photography is looking into the ramifications of issuing its S. C. Smith collection in two different formats. First it could follow the example set by the Alexander Turnbull Library and issue a folio of say six or ten Wellington views. The other idea being looked into would be to issue them as a special collector's edition, using fibre based paper and selenium toning them. Well known photographer Niel Penman has been approached with this in mind.

Whatever is decided upon, this release will no doubt focus attention on Smith and will deservedly bring him into the spotlight. As a consequence, the price for his postcards will invariably increase. As far as my own feelings about this are concerned, I am proud to have played a role in obtaining these relics from the past and seeing them used in some way to rectify the wrongs which may have unknowingly been dealt to Sydney Charles Smith.

POSTSCRIPT

While the preceding article correctly focuses attention on work Smith undertook before the 1930s, comparatively little is known about the quality and range of any work he did during and after the depression. In this respect, I have recently been fortunate in obtaining a selection of Smith postcards which were made around a twenty year period beginning with the floating dock arriving in Wellington in 1931, a period which ended with immigrant ships arriving in Wellington Harbour in the 1950s. By this time, it seems Smith had switched over from larger format cameras to hand held models. Although the quality of these is at times inferior to work he accomplished prior to the 1930s, there is much that suggests he was still very capable in astutely defining photographs that would readily sell.

During the mid to late 1920s, Smith broadened his range of views which had hitherto centred on Wellington to incorporate scenes from Auckland Christchurch and Dunedin.



Apart from providing Real Photo postcards on a limited basis amongst his clientele, Smith had many of his photographs issued by companies that give him better returns by distributing his images throughout New Zealand such as F.T. and Tanner Bros. Ltd. Two postcards from my collection in his latter series feature boats. The stranding of the *Wangaella* on Barrett's Reef in January 1947 and the immigrant ship *Southern Cross* leaving Wellington in May 1955.

