

Structures of Feeling: The Photographs of Geoff Charles

Curated by Peter Finnemore and Russell Roberts

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Tramshed

*Between the 1930s and 1980s, Geoff Charles was an established photojournalist who contributed extensively to a variety of Welsh newspapers and magazines. Throughout the North and the Borders he documented the fabric of daily life as well as the traditions and modernisation of Wales. **Stuart Anderson** reflects on a selection of images from the National Library of Wales' collection, curated by Peter Finnemore and Russell Roberts.*

The photograph, as a medium of representation, is intrinsically linked to time. Not only in the application of exposures, frames per second or the other physical elements of the medium, but as a chronology. It is the most effective tool in our society for providing cultural continuity and historical recording within a visual medium. But the rigid immovability of the photograph as a document of what has been remains a double edge sword. The image is stationary and unchanging, all the while we, as individuals and communities move ever further away from the time in which they were made. Other less important or prominent images are destroyed, lost, or fade away. Gradually the people and places represented in the images become less and less familiar to those viewing them. Eventually, when enough time has past, we see nothing in them. Only anonymous faces and locations, all of which lack the appropriate context in which they were originally viewed. They become artefacts, and like archaeologists, it is our job to rediscover their once treasured importance. A selection of the work of Geoff Charles, re-presented in this new exhibition, highlights the need for us to continually return to images of the past. Not only to preserve them for the history of our society, but also to remind us of the shared experience of what it was to be a person in these fabled places and at these elusive times.

The way in which these ideas have been applied in this exhibition, curated by Peter Finnemore and Russell Roberts, is to remove the photographs from their natural chronological order and to reassemble them into groups. The groupings are made on a typological basis or upon similar events within the image. Each group is then given their own coloured wall to which they can exist separately without influence or reference to each other. By doing this, Finnemore and Roberts have allowed the images to take on a sense of personal experience, allowing them to be examined on a far more emotive level than the clinical nature of the historical archive would normally allow. We are presented with scenes

of amateur dramatics and charity functions, cross dressing and druidic rituals, models of future development and museum pieces.

While in their reassessment of the work of Charles, the two curators have managed to pull a particularly interesting trick upon the viewer. We do not necessarily have direct knowledge of the people and places in these photographs, but by presenting them in this evocative and almost nostalgic manner, it has shown a near repetition of history. We see the beginnings of a consumer culture in the 1950's and 1960's, a culture in which today we see another, almost inevitable expansion. We see images of people planning new developments in the quest for modernisation, but many of the developments pictured are now ironically in line to be redeveloped and modernised for this century, revealing a pleasing cyclical nature to our culture, or perhaps their initial shortcomings. We are also shown a film regarding the flooding of the Tryweryn valley to provide a reservoir for the city of Liverpool, a symbol for other massive changes inflicted upon Wales by others. Changes that, perhaps in a more subtle way are still occurring.

The one thing that the new exhibition of these images have taught us, is that the recognition of a situation or of an emotional attachment is usually a far more powerful than the simple representation of what was before the camera at that time. We then no longer see anonymous individuals or groups. We see ourselves.

Stuart Anderson

<http://thingsunsaidthenforgotten.wordpress.com>