

# A DIFFERENT TIME: the expedition photographs OF HERBERT BASEDOW 1903–1928

One of the Museum's contributions to 2008's Vivid photography festival is *A Different Time: the Expedition Photographs of Herbert Basedow 1903–1928*. *A Different Time* is an exhibition that will showcase one of the Museum's little-known treasures – photographs taken by Dr Herbert Basedow mostly in central and northern Australia between, as the title suggests, 1903 and 1928.

Basedow always took a camera with him on his numerous trips into what were then remote areas of Australia. His photographic collection begins with the 1903 Government North-West Prospecting Expedition into the far north-west of South Australia and the Northern Territory. On this expedition he took two Kodak cameras, one that took square negatives and the other was a panorama camera. On about half of his trips he used more than one camera and on expeditions in 1916, 1920 and 1922 he used three. Apart from the 1903 trip and another in 1926, when Basedow had two or more cameras one took glass negatives and the other/s film negatives.

Basedow's next expedition investigated the geology of the coastline between Port Essington and the mouth of the Victoria River, and from Darwin south to Katherine, with South Australia's Government Geologist, H. Y. L. Brown. Unfortunately, the Museum only has a few photographs from this expedition and the location of the remainder, if they survive, is yet to be located. Basedow was later based in Darwin for a short period in 1911, when he took a small number of photographs.

Between 1905 and 1907 Basedow made a number of short visits to the Flinders Ranges, again undertaking geological investigations. On the first he came across Aboriginal rock

Members of the 1923 Vice-Regal Expedition. Left to right: Herbert Basedow, Captain Hambleton, Murray Auger, Sir Tom Bridges (Governor of South Australia), W. A. Webb, Sir Henry Barwell (Premier of South Australia), Thomas McCallum and N. G. Bell.  
Taken by an unknown photographer using Basedow's camera at an unknown place.  
1985.0060.2783  
National Museum of Australia



engravings which he continued to document on subsequent trips. Between April 1907 and July 1910 Basedow undertook postgraduate studies in Europe. After returning, he continued investigating rock engravings in the Flinders Ranges and in 1914 published his findings. This was one of many articles, as well as two books, that Basedow published on Aboriginal cultures between 1904 and 1935. He also published articles on geology and zoology.

Basedow undertook further expeditions in search of mineral deposits; to the Kimberley in 1916 and the Victoria River district in 1922. His other major expeditions were to report on the health of South Australia's Aboriginal people in the state's settled districts and the south of the Northern Territory in 1919 and 1920, a vice-regal trip to central Australia in 1923, and two trips funded by wealthy grazier Donald Mackay into central Australia in 1926 and Arnhem Land in 1928.

*A Different Time* examines all of these trips through Basedow's photographs and some of the objects he collected. The exhibition also considers the technology of Basedow's photography, his work as a scientist and, not the least important, the man himself.

Selecting the photographs for the exhibition proved to be an interesting challenge. There are over 2500 images in the National Museum's Basedow collection; narrowing this down to less than 200 meant a lot of wonderful images cannot be included. I was ably assisted in this process by Edwin Ride who worked as a volunteer on the project. Edwin brought experience in working with historical photographs and his valuable knowledge was of great assistance. For example, it was Edwin who brought to my attention the fact that some 'pairs' of photographs may have been deliberately photographed by Basedow in a way that may enable them to be viewed together with a stereoscope to produce a 3-D image.



Hut decked with porcupine grass, Eastern Aranda people, Arltunga district, Northern Territory, August 1920.  
1985.0060.1053  
National Museum of Australia

Initially we had selected many more images than could be fitted into the exhibition. After Edwin had finished work on the project, it was left to me to cull these to the required number. Armed with certain parameters, like the expedition modules should reflect on the people and places Basedow encountered and expedition activities, combined with some pragmatism, the final selection was made.

One of the problems we had to deal with was the identification of individual photographs. While a lot of Basedow's photographs had already been documented, there were still many that were not. During the lead-up to the selection for the exhibition, Edwin and I recreated several rolls of film negatives. These are large format and they had been cut into individual negatives. By matching the edges we could determine where individual negatives fitted. On each roll we know what one or two images are depicting, and so could place the rolls in chronological order. And by referring to publications or diaries we can fill in most, if not all, of the gaps. In this way 15 rolls, involving 90 images, were recreated for the 1926 expeditions and many more photographs can now be better documented.

To ensure the highest quality reproductions for the exhibition, the Museum's photography section has produced high resolution digital copies of the selected images.



Aboriginal children resting on a mangrove stump while bathing, Sunday Island, Western Australia, 9 May 1916.  
1985.0060.1119  
National Museum of Australia

Not all are negatives; some are glass lantern slides of the negatives. Slides have been selected only where a negative is not held by the Museum, as the former provides the higher quality. As Museum photographer Lannon Harley explains

The process of digitising the images in the exhibition took several months. Through a digital photographic capture process utilising state of the art equipment, the Museum's photographers matched the density and colour of each individual glass plate, negative and lantern slide to the original. The need for accuracy and the care in handling the fragile plates and negatives meant that the digitisation of each original took roughly forty-five minutes.

As Basedow's expeditions covered a period of great technological development in photography, the reprographic process needed to cater for an extensive range of photographic formats and variations in the condition of the originals. This required a flexible approach to the digitisation process, ensuring that the individual features of each photographic image, as well as the idiosyncrasies of the object itself, could be reproduced accurately. The resulting images are a scientific reproduction of the photographic original itself as an object.

In producing the 'positive' images a decision was made to move away from a purely scientific interpretation of the original and focus on creating a photographic print that, while not faithful to the printing process of the period, would reflect the drama, aesthetics and themes that Basedow endeavoured to portray in his travels.

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Entrance to Wangalinnya Caves, Napier Ranges, Western Australia. Mr Sherwin, manager of *Napier Downs* station (left) and Basedow's travelling companion, Gilbert St. John Sanders, 15 April 1916. 1985.0060.1411 National Museum of Australia

**A Different Time: the Expedition Photographs of Herbert Basedow 1903–1928 opens on 11 July in the Gallery of First Australians Focus Gallery. A special preview will be held for Friends the day before.**



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