

A history of virtual reality in Australia

You may believe that Virtual Reality is new, and has recently emerged though the efforts of companies such as Oculus and Samsung. By virtual reality we mean of course feeling as though you are there, within the scene, “a three dimensional image or environment... Oxford Dictionary”.

I love being transported into a different world, especially through a photograph or video, one where I would normally have no access into. It may be because the image is from the other side of the world, or since I cannot ‘wingsuit’ from a plane, or perhaps going back in time. Which leads me back to the first statement, access to this three dimensional world has been available since the dawn of photography. In Australia, the first immersive photograph, or as they called them in those days, a stereogram, was taken in 1850 by TS Glaister with a portrait of Sydney University Professor John Smith. It started a craze for stereo 3D photographs, with Glaister and Smith being but two of 24 professionals and 30 amateurs practicing this craft by the mid 1850s. Their images of our early cities and countryside, of people and ships, transports the viewer to their world far more than any standard photograph could actually deliver. One of my favourite early photographers is the husband and wife team of William and Thelka Hetzer. Look their images up through google!



Frank Hurley 1911 to 1914 Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) in Antarctica

Of course the technology needed in those early days was different to that of today, but no less complicated. Glass plates, daguerreotype, Tintype, various types of sensitized paper and lots of chemicals with hefty cameras. Over the

decades the technologies changed allowing for capturing moving images (both removing blurring and also capturing motion), cheaper and more portable. Indeed by just before the Great War, Frank Hurley was able to capture stereo (3D) photographs as the official photographer for Douglas Mawson's 1911-14 Antarctic Expedition. Indeed during the war, Hurley continued now as an official war photographer. Although he was not at Gallipoli, another stereo photographer was, Charles Snodgrass Ryan the assistant director of medical services, 1st Division, Australian Imperial Force. These photographs still send shivers of fear and grime to the viewer as one feels like being on the beach awaiting the next shell.

By the 1950s Kodachrome film and Realist Stereo cameras made the taking of 3D photographs something anyone could do. 3D Photography Clubs formed throughout Australia. Indeed next year in April 2017, the National Stereo Photography Convention, which is held every two years, will meet in Canberra on the 50 year anniversary when and where the first Australian 3D convention was held. This convention is hosted by two clubs, the Sydney Stereo Camera Club and the Victorian 3D Society, with strong support from the New Zealand Stereoscopic Society. Club members have for this period been taking 3D images using primarily 35mm slide film and since 2000 digital images, using a variety of custom built and manufactured 3D cameras. As would be expected, the subject matter varies from nature, portraiture, city life and creative. Of immense historical significance are 3D images of major events such as visits by royalty, and the building of our cities. Especially architecture is served well, from the building of the Sydney Harbour Bridge to the Sydney Opera House.



Fuji W3

Technologies continue to transform this craft. Holography, where the image is floats in space, became an art form in the 1980s with artists such as Paula Dawson winning international fame. Today, Oculus, Samsung and others have brought headset based Virtual Reality with the ability to see 3D images in every direction, and even to ‘walk’ around within the scene. At the next National Stereo Convention the new Vuze 3D 360 consumer camera will be on display, as will be a number of fantastically immersive 3D video and image shows.



If you are interested in the world of virtual reality and 3D images please contact the author, or better still book for a place at the convention.

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