

William Henry Corkhill and the Tilba Tilba Collection

IN 1890, at the age of forty-four, William Henry Corkhill of Tilba Tilba — accountant, cheesemaker and farm manager — decided to become a photographer. There is no record of his ever receiving any training in photography, but he had, it seems, read a few books on the subject. Over the next twenty years, he would take thousands of pictures of his family, friends and neighbours, seldom venturing beyond the confines of his local community with his camera.

In 1975 Corkhill's daughter offered the National Library his collection of glass plate negatives, which had dwindled over the intervening decades to about 1000 in number. Suffering the decays of time and damp, only 840 of the plates still retained printable images, but the record they contain of life in a small but thriving rural community at the turn of the twentieth century is fascinating. As we see Tilba Tilba through Corkhill's eyes, he, too, as the creator of this singularly focused, longitudinal record, becomes fascinating.

The Tilba district lies inland from the New South Wales south coast, between Narooma and Bega. By 1900 it supported a population of 1200 people, mainly engaged in dairying. The mining of gold at Mt Dromedary contributed to a general prosperity that favoured the establishment of large families who remained in the district and inter-married. In 1882 Henry Jefferson Bates and his wife invited Corkhill to visit Tilba Tilba. When Corkhill married their daughter Frances the following year, he joined one of the district's larger families and, through them, became 'cousin' to many others.

The twenty-year span of the Tilba Tilba collection allows us to see the life of this community as it unfolds and develops. Important milestones and events in family and social life are commemorated in photographs of weddings, picnics, sports days and the Tilba District Agricultural Show. We see people going about their work on farms, in the cheese-making factories and at the mines. Proud householders stand in front of tents, slab huts or substantial houses. Twenty years in a small, stable community of large families reveals the rhythm of community life as babies are born, grow

up and marry before our eyes, and as the birth of a great-grandchild is celebrated with a portrait of four generations of the family.

Corkhill's familiarity with, and affection for, his subjects is evident throughout the collection, and imbues his photographs with a strange combination of authority and informality. He has a rather casual approach to the backgrounds in his portraits, as if his familiarity with the scenes he records makes him impervious to some of their oddities. Personal dignity, family pride and adherence to borrowed pictorial conventions result, on occasion, in some very serious sitters. Small children with grave faces stare resolutely at the camera, determined not to move and spoil the portrait. Everyone else, however, returns Corkhill's regard with equanimity. Young

women in particular become beauties under his sympathetic eye, smiling quietly as he makes their brief glory last forever.

Although the negatives came to the National Library without records identifying the sitters, Sister Pearl Corkhill and other residents of the Tilba district were able to name most of the people and places. The caption lists provided by Norman Hoyer are strangely moving as he details the successes and disasters of his forebears' lives, the deaths of children and the survival of others to advanced age. Other collections documenting the life of rural communities — such as Mandurama, Gundagai and Yass — are held by the National Library, but none follows the lives of identifiable individuals over so many years, and none triumphs over the passage of time with such a sense of permanence, as those long dead continue to gaze at us from the prime of their lives.

Michelle Hetherington has worked at the National Library of Australia for thirteen years. She was the curator of a number of National Library exhibitions, including *Paradise Possessed: the Rex Nan Kivell Collection*, *The World Upside Down: Australia 1788–1830* and *Cook and Omai: the Cult of the South Seas*. She is currently working in the Library's Pictorial Section.