

BRUCE POSTLE AND JOHN LAMB – 2006

By Michael Smith

It is almost impossible to compare photographers of different eras - different environment, different tools of trade, different competition. But if there was a debate about whether Bruce Postle and John Lamb were two of the greatest in the history of Australian Press photography, there is a strong case for the affirmative.

Same-day press photography is only about 100 years old in Australia. *The Age* didn't have a staff photographer until after the First World War. And the *Sun News-Pictorial* was still a few years away from its first edition.

Postle and Lamb were on the job for a good chunk of that history – and their portfolios reflect some of the great moments and images of Australian history. Both had a cupboard full of silverware long before the Melbourne Press Club Quills were introduced – Walkleys, Press Photographer of the Year and lots more. They are the same age and both started work in the mid-1950s.

Lamb began as a messenger boy at *The Age*, with no intention of becoming a photographer. He worked in the mail room, then photo sales, then as a gopher in the dark room. One day the picture editor tossed him a camera and told him to go to the airport and take a shot. Lamb told him he wasn't interested. He changed his mind when the photo editor threatened to sack him if he didn't get to the airport.

Postle, however, was born with a camera in his hand. His father was a photographer at the *Courier Mail* in Brisbane and Bruce took his first picture at age seven with his father's Graphlex. Ten years later he followed his father to the *Courier*. Postle and Lamb were joined at *The Age* in 1968 when Postle moved here from Brisbane. It was when *The Age* was being reinvigorated by Ranald Macdonald and Graham Perkin after being half-asleep for half a century. Part of that reinvigoration was better use of pictures. The old broadsheet had realised that one of the few editorial advantages of the bigger page size was the capacity to run pictures bigger than a tabloid. Good photographers thrived.

Postle and Lamb, and some of their peers at *The Herald* and *The Sun*, redefined Press photography when the doomsayers were saying the introduction of television would kill still pictures. They took pictorial creativity to new levels. Over a period of more than 30 years, they were leaders and sources of inspiration for a couple of generations of photographers.

It was my good fortune to work with Postle and Lamb as a reporter and then as their editor at *The Age*. As a reporter, you knew that your chances of being published up the front of the paper had increased dramatically if Lamb or Postle were assigned to the job with you. As an editor, one of my more uncomfortable daily stresses was getting to about 8 or 9 o'clock at night without a picture worthy of Page 1. But you never panicked if Postle or Lamb were still out on a job or still printing in the dark room – their strike rate was better than Adam Gilchrist's.

Postle and Lamb worked contacts as hard as any reporter I knew. They won the trust of Prime Ministers and Archbishops, who sometimes did ridiculous things for them. They refused to believe there was not a front page picture in any job they were assigned, no matter how mundane it seemed – and it wasn't often the picture you were expecting. And if they didn't get a great picture, there was always the chance they would come across one on the way back to the office. They were the antithesis of that detestable newsroom wet blanket, the nothing-in-it-man.

Lamb was a gunslinger – fast, cunning, cool, determined and persistent. But he was a big-hearted gunslinger, capable of conveying great warmth in images of people, especially children. He had the best eye and instinct for a picture of anyone we knew. For years in the 80s and 90s he worked in partnership with John Lahey to produce hundreds of extraordinary picture stories of ordinary Australians under the dinkus *Lahey At Large*. John Lahey says that many of those stories were found by John Lamb, some of them simply by pulling up on the highway and chatting to someone.

Postle was an artist – he saw the world differently to anyone else and it showed in his photographs. Like many geniuses, he had a touch of insanity and absent-mindedness. He once got a dressing down at the *Courier Mail* for pretending to be a trained parachutist and persuading people at an air show to let him jump to take an air-to-air

shot. He had never jumped in his life. But the picture made page 1. He once drove an office car through a paddock steering with his feet while he hung out the window to take a picture of horses on the move. He did so because his reporter didn't drive. The picture made page 1.

Postle lost more camera gear than any other photographer in history. One picture editor sent him swimming in the Maribyrnong River after he dropped another camera into the drink. He loved taking personal pictures of the families of his friends.

But sometimes you had to wait a long time for the photos – they would get lost somewhere, sometimes for years. He once took some wedding pictures and by the time they were delivered the couple were divorced.

Another Melbourne Press Club Lifetime Achiever, Les Carlyon, once said : “ Postle has never lost his hunger. He is still looking for the special shot, the rare effect, the angle no-one has tried before.”

One of the acceptable clichés in journalism is that one picture can be worth a lot of words. That can sometimes depend on whose pictures and whose words. In the case of Postle and Lamb, it was almost invariably true.