



Ans Westra

A life in photography

PAUL MOON



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A WOMAN DRIVEN TO PHOTOGRAPH

The photographer Ans Westra, who died in 2023, took hundreds of thousands of images over her long career. Together, those images constitute what is arguably a photo album of Aotearoa.

Her dedication and determination sometimes came at a cost but she was focused and driven, overcoming a difficult childhood in the Netherlands and later complex adult relationships to forge her own path.

Warm, engaging and sympathetic, this richly illustrated biography interrogates her remarkable — and at times controversial — practice and a life that always put photography first.

'This richly detailed biography is an all-encompassing overview of one of the foremost chroniclers of New Zealand life' — Linda Herrick, New Zealand Listener

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Paul Moon ONZM is a professor of history at Auckland University of Technology's Te Ara Poutama, the Faculty of Māori Development, where he has taught since 1993. He is the prolific author of many books, including biographies of William Hobson, Robert FitzRoy, and the Ngāpuhi rangatira Hone Heke and Hone Heke Ngapua. He is a Fellow of both the Royal Historical Society at University College London and of the Royal Society of Arts.

SALES POINTS

- The first biography of a major New Zealand cultural figure
- 84 images from across Ans Westra's career
- Handsomely packaged

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This generation made, right across the sea, about, and through it, whatever time, published in *Maori*.



Field name, Whangāwhangā, and in *Maori*, published in *Maori*.



From *Maori* by *Maori*, published in *Maori*.

Broken Ends 203

She was adamant she did not want to include 'pretty pictures' of landscapes because such images meant nothing in terms of how a landscape affected people, other than in a very narrow aesthetic sense.¹⁶ Her photographs appeared without captions, left to speak for themselves.

All the photographs were in colour, which was still comparatively new for Anz. 'It took a long time to go from black and white to colour,' she said, 'and have the colours in the right places where they actually contributed to composition. Black and white was just light and shade and it's what you respond to more easily, but I think I've managed to work in colour ... well, I will call it a mischievous.' The images in *Maori* confirm that by the 2000s Anz had harnessed the moment, if not tamed it entirely. The landscapes contain a range of colours that are the hallmark of popular social photographs but without their cloying beautification.

Anz's mastery of arranging images produced a narrative of its own that ran throughout the work. The sequence of photographs reveals the mounting impact of human on nature, but in a manner that is always subtle and that does not make the images subservient to the message. It was the sort of fine balancing act Anz had refined through decades of experience — a gift she had of effecting a slow build through a succession of scenes.

Photographs of rising intrusions, crumbling concrete, the carcass of a rusting car give way to images of land sub-division, fences being cleared, roads being extended and humans expanding relentlessly and unthinkingly, colonising nature.

Throughout this carefully assembled photographic fabric, Anz wove a dark thread. The theme of death permeates *Maori* (Anz), with several of the images — crucifixes, cemeteries, felled trees and various dead animals — alluding to mortality. Among much else, the motifs of death serve to remind the reader that humans necessarily have a short lease on their surrounds, and that not even the greatest incursions into nature will be permanent.

One of the more intriguing motifs appears in the photograph of a *prau* (wharua) (a traditional Maori carved wooden post used to what looks like an overgrown park, with the view of the post itself slightly obscured by

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The rest of the book was devoted to images of the children playing in the shallows of the river, and exploring the terrain along its banks. But there are two small 'wires' at the end. The penultimate photograph was taken at night. At its very centre is the white glow of an electric lantern. The children hover over this light, their faces partially lit up by it. Beyond them, the light falls away into a deep, dark shadow — in fact most of the photograph is completely black, giving the light a sense of almost spiritual isolation.

The final photograph is of one of the children reflected in the river. The water is not quite settled enough to make out which child it is, and a few reeds and bits of debris obscure the reflection further. The viewer is invited to reconstruct the image of the child based on these clues. There is no accompanying text. The more obvious image to finish the book might have been the night-time case on the previous page, but Anz was never one for a conventional ending. Instead she used the final photograph to anticipate another day of activity.

Her ability to fine-tune the arrangement of her photographs in larger works enabled her to control the pace and direction of the narrative — in this case even more so than *Maori*'s case. But of her expertise was to ensure that the reader's imagination was constantly being engaged, often challenged, and occasionally even caught off-guard.¹⁷ She was not inclined to contrive effects simply because she was capable of them, and now was there anything pedestrian in her approach. Instead, over a series of images she used the techniques of scene-setting, composition, lighting and subject selection to control the movement of the narrative, to direct the anticipation of the reader for what might come next, and to contribute to the atmosphere of the locations being depicted.

Although *We Live by a Lake* was a children's book, it received the attention of one of the emerging titans of Maori literature, Wai Iti, who reviewed the book in 1994 and described the experience of reading it as 'like looking through a childhood photograph album'. While he was full of praise for the photographs and text, he was critical of some of the production elements: 'Reproduction of the photographs is a little too grey and grainy,' he



From *We Live by a Lake*.