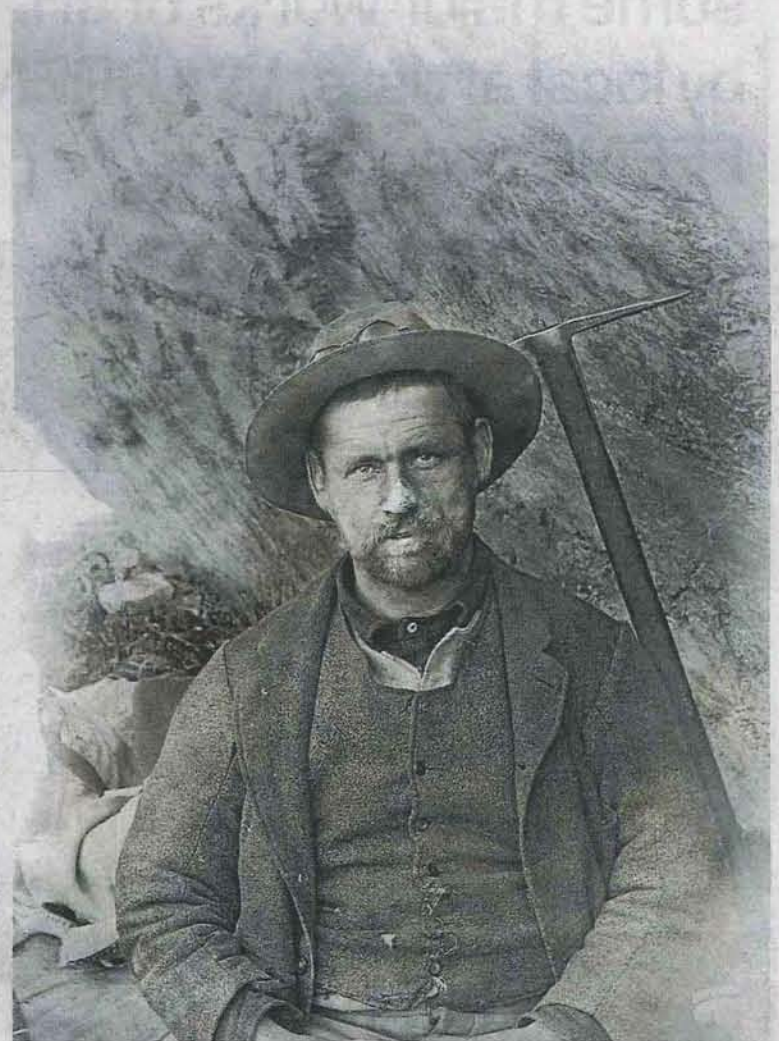


GO ARTS

MOUNTAIN MAN



The guide: Jack Adamson, face blistered by the sun, lanolin-covered nose, around the De la Beche bivvy in the Southern Alps between 1893 and 1894.

Double dip: Jack Adamson and American Tommy Law in the hot pool at Welcome Flats circa 1897.

He was a young man with a deep love of the Southern Alps and a personal vision of recording their natural and human geography through the camera lens.

It was the 1890s. A brief 50 years after its invention, photography was still in its pioneer stages when Jack Adamson, son of a South Canterbury farmer, set out on his journey to photograph what was seen as a raw wilderness.

A practical man with great humour and appetite for life, Adamson was a self-taught photographer who combined a career as a mountaineer, mountain guide and manager of the Hermitage Hotel with his consuming appetite for photography. Not simply to document what he saw but to communicate something of the mountains' majesty and fierce beauty.

Move forward 120 years to a day when 450 photographic plates and nitrate photographs arrived at the South Canterbury Museum in Timaru, donated by Adamson's family led by his grandson Pat.

"When they arrived we didn't fully realise what an impact they would have. It was only when we began to examine them closely that the full significance of these photographs became clear," the museum's curator of documentary history, Tony Rippin, remembers.

"Although the photographs were physically protected, after 120 years there was some physical

The work of one of New Zealand's first alpine photographers has just come to light. CHRISTOPHER MOORE reports.

deterioration. Some of the plates had frilling around the edges, others had suffered emulsion loss and there was some cracking, but it became obvious that they were still capable of producing fantastic images."

For Rhian Gallagher, Timaru-born writer and poet, the first encounter with Adamson came after 18 years spent in London living and working as a publisher. The recipient of a 2007 Canterbury History Foundation Award now confronted the challenge of setting the man and his work in context, unravelling the twists and turns of his remarkable life.

It soon became clear that Adamson was a pragmatic, physically and mentally strong man but one with the soul of a born artist. Many of the images are vivid, pristine impressions of the clarity and immensity of the mountains.

"From the first afternoon I saw these photographs, I was entranced by them. I'd worked in the United Kingdom and seen other photographic collections but it was immediately clear that Adamson's photographs were equally important and of an equal quality," Gallagher says.

"He covered such a range of subjects and emotions. His personality emerges clearly through these images. I had this instinct about the man which has

been supported by his photography."

Adamson was born in Timaru in 1867, growing up in Albury at the foot of the Southern Alps. The son of Scots migrants who had established themselves as small farmers, Adamson had inherited his parents' stubborn resilience. In 1882, the 16-year-old encountered his first mountaineers at Albury station, assisting Rev William Green from Ireland and his two Swiss companions to unload their heavy equipment from the train.

Adamson was immediately bitten by the mountain bug. By 1889 he was employed at The Hermitage, the first New Zealand-born guide to escort tourists on to the glaciers and some of the lower peaks. He was also taking photographs. For the young guide this represented an economic investment. Photography was not cheap and the guide's wages were not high.

"He was among the first New Zealand alpine photographers at a time when the Mt Cook area was on the cusp of increased tourism. He also had the advantage of having more time to take photographs, he worked at The Hermitage and built a darkroom there. He was aware of the changes which were occurring in the region and wanted to record them," Gallagher says.

"He showed a broad interest in people who had nothing directly

to do with mountaineering. He broke with conventions of the time, most notably in the images of his children which are wonderfully vital and expressive. At times he was simply playful with his camera."

In 1893, he married the beautiful Nora Quinn from Mistake (now Godley Peaks) Station. Nora was an equally strong personality – self-sufficient, determined and one of the best horsewomen in the Mackenzie. It was clear by the number of photographs of Nora and his children that this was a love match.

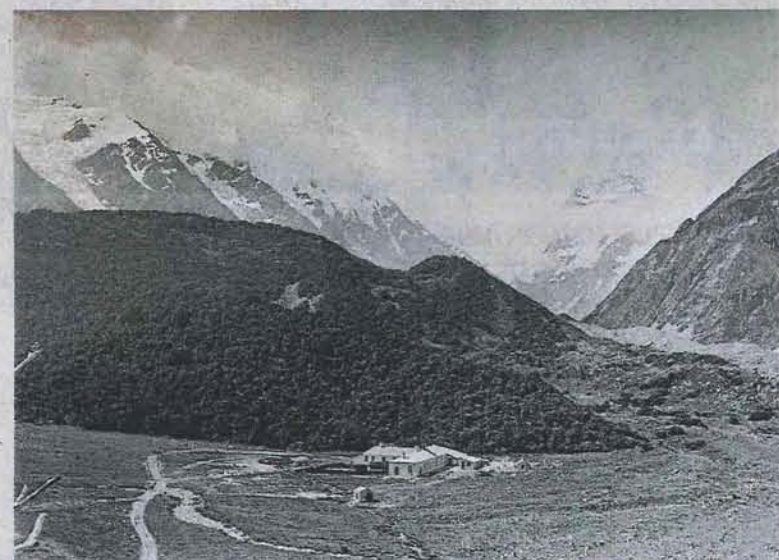
"Both Jack and Nora loved the Southern Alps. The mountains were bound up with their relationship together," Tony

Rippin says.

Adamson's remarkable photographs are the focus of an exhibition at the South Canterbury Museum and a new book, *Feeling for Daylight. The Photographs of Jack Adamson*. But how would Adamson, not a man for the public limelight, have reacted to the public response?

"I suspect that he would have been slightly embarrassed," Rippin says.

■ The exhibition of Jack Adamson's photographs is on at the South Canterbury Museum until September 12. The accompanying book (hardback, \$44.95) can be ordered through the museum or is available at Christchurch's University Book Shop.



Love in the alps: Adamson's photo of The Hermitage with Mt Cook in the distance.