

FEATURES

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A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A FIRE SAFETY OFFICER

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Family photos: Ellen Jeanie Adamson, Jack and Nora's eldest daughter. Adamson's photographs of his children were far less formal than most photos of the time.



Early days: Adamson's photo shows the first Hermitage dwarfed by Mt Cook, as viewed from Foliage Hill.

There's almost reverence in their voices when Rhian Gallagher and Tony Rippin talk about Jack Adamson.

That's probably not surprising considering how the author and South Canterbury Museum's documentary history curator have come to know the farmer's son who, in his own way, was instrumental in mountaineering and tourism becoming such an integral part of the Mt Cook way of life.

This week's launch of the museum's latest book, *Feeling For Daylight: The Photographs of Jack Adamson* by Gallagher, and the launch of an exhibition of Adamson's photography at the museum, are the culmination of talks that began with the Adamson family five years ago. Pat Adamson, Jack's grandson, was keen to see the collection of around 450 glass photographic plates, cellulose nitrate negatives and some of Adamson's original camera gear suitably housed. The family decided to place the collection in the care of the museum.

Yes, many of the images are showing their 120-year age, but that has not deterred Rippin's enthusiasm for photos which capture everything from the scenic Southern Alps of the 1890s and the climbers who visited, to the area's geography, the region's "settler community" and family photos.

Gallagher's involvement with the collection and the writing of the book started almost by accident. She was archiving other photographs at the museum when Rippin showed her some of Adamson's work.

"I mentioned them to her and she was pretty captivated, pretty quickly," Rippin said, realising once Gallagher saw the images she would want to work with them.

Her reaction to the photos was they should be in a book – a catalogue-format book with large prints to show off the photos.

That idea grew. Out of it has come a book which is both the story of the first New Zealand guide to work at Mt Cook and of Adamson – an early manager of the Hermitage – who found himself "shafted", probably because a working class man had taken on roles traditionally reserved for those much higher up the social ladder.

So who was Jack Adamson? As Gallagher points out, Adamson's name does not feature in the history of New Zealand photography, and his roles as an early manager of the Hermitage and the first New Zealand-born mountain guide are not widely known. Adamson's name is recognised by some climbers and those with an interest in the history of the region, but few know the details of his story.

Unlike many of the early mountaineers, Adamson was a working man. Born in Timaru, he grew up on the family farm at Albury. In 1889, at 21, he moved to Mt Cook to work as a general hand

at The Hermitage. His interest in the mountains and climbing quickly saw him start guiding the Hermitage's visitors.

As well as ensuring the safety of clients with limited mountaineering experience, guides also bore the brunt of the work associated with the climbing expedition – cutting ice steps and carrying heavier swags. Yet Adamson chose to add even more weight to what he carried on those expeditions – his camera. Such equipment would have added 15lbs to 17lbs (6kg to 7kg) to his swag.

Considering Adamson's working class background, his interest in photography was unusual. His camera and basic accessories would have cost around £15, with additional lenses costing £5 each. Considering the average weekly wage at that time was £1 it was highly unusual for someone of his background to be so involved in photography.

While some of the early mountaineers did take photos, Adamson's advantage was living at Mt Cook all year round. His photography was not confined to a summer climbing visit.

Gallagher speaks about the spontaneity and enthusiasm in many of the images, especially those which would have required a very hurried setup to capture the moment.

"Attempting this out in the middle of the Tasman Glacier with tripod, camera and delicate glass-plates to be removed from a light-proof box, would have involved some very deft manoeuvring. The results of such efforts may not be the most technically proficient and the subject anecdotal, but the immediacy is rare for its time."

While the dry-plate process tended to reduce tonal range, Gallagher suggests it actually adds mystery and atmosphere to the photos, especially as we are so used to the "white peaks – blue sky" image of the alps.

Adamson had been working at The Hermitage for five years when manager Frank Huddleston retired. Adamson took over and also continued his guiding work.

He built a darkroom at the Hermitage and his new wife Nora Quinn did much of the developing and printing. Family life began to feature in Adamson's photography. Going against the norm of formal studio photos, the Adamson children were often photographed in the



Welcome heat: Jack Adamson and Tommy Law relax in the hot mineral pools at Welcome Flat.

MOUNTAIN MAN

If ever a Kiwi battler's story deserves to be told, it's probably that of Jack Adamson, the Timaru "Jack of All Trades", who became the first New Zealand-born guide at Mt Cook 120 years ago. His story and photography is the subject of a major exhibition and book being launched by the South Canterbury Museum on Friday. Rhonda Markby takes a look at the man whose deeds back then were pivotal in establishing both tourism and mountaineering at Mt Cook.



The man: Jack Adamson in the environment he loved. It is thought this photo was taken at the De la Beche bivvy rock in the Aoraki Mt Cook National Park. He is wearing clothing typical of that worn by climbers in the 1890s.

outdoors.

The 1890s was not a good period for The Hermitage, and the Adamsons found themselves at the centre of a company declared bankrupt in 1894. From then on the couple were meant to be the hotel's caretakers and not take in guests, but the guests kept arriving.

Adamson was very aware many local working class people would suffer if it closed. There were those who operated the coaches taking visitors to Mt Cook and those providing provisions to The Hermitage. He estimated closing The Hermitage would mean the loss of £1600 to the district's working class who were already facing hard times.

The government bought The Hermitage in 1895 but gave

Adamson no authorisation for hiring additional staff or buying food. The hotel's future remained in limbo the following year although the government continued to advertise and promote the Southern Alps as a tourist highlight.

The couple repeatedly sent letters to the Lands and Survey Department which was meant to be managing the resort. Repeatedly they asked how they were to provide for visitors.

Matters came to a head when the *Herald* quoted visitors to The Hermitage criticising the government for its lack of management of the hotel and considered it "reprehensible that advertisements intended to induce people to visit Mt Cook should continue to be circulated by the Government".

Adamson went on to lease the hotel, but it was later found that arrangement was illegal. When bosses in Wellington demanded to see the accounts, there were none. Adamson had bought his stores from local people and he did not have receipts.

Though promised he would be paid for the stores, he never was. Nora's wages were never paid either.

In September 1896, Adamson's lease was terminated and when the couple left they were almost bankrupt.

Adamson was never given the chance to tell his side of the story and he pursued his case with the government to clear his name. He was to finally receive compensation some seven years after he was dismissed.

"Adamson's commitment to The Hermitage, which was founded on a genuine passion for the Southern Alps, had been manipulated and abused," Gallagher says in her book.

She suspects class prejudice also came into it, suggesting if he had been in a position of influence and social power, he would never have been treated in such a way.

While Adamson never made any major climbs, his contribution to establishing mountaineering at Mt Cook was significant. He supported other climbers during his time there. New Zealanders Tom Fyfe, George Graham and Jack Clarke – who together achieved the first ascent of Mt Cook – were all employed by him at some stage.

Attempts by New Zealand mountaineers to climb Cook intensified in November 1894 when it became known English climber Edward FitzGerald was heading to New Zealand with Italian guide Matthias Zurbriggen.

The New Zealanders were determined to climb Mt Cook first. National pride was at stake. Fyfe,



Hard climb: Adamson captures early rock climbers in action on De la Beche around 1897.



Valued collection: Tony Rippin and Rhian Gallagher prepare the Jack Adamson exhibition at the South Canterbury Museum.

Graham and Clarke made it to the summit of Mt Cook on Christmas Day 1894.

The Adamsons lived at Fairlie for a couple of years after leaving Mt Cook, but Adamson was to go back into the mountains in 1897 when, along with Jack McKay, he headed for the West Coast searching for gold. Joined for part of the journey by Tommy Law, they made the first crossing of the Graham Saddle to Waiho River. It took 32 days. Europeans had never ventured into much of the area. The pair were the first Europeans to find the mineral hot pools at Welcome Flat.

They did not find gold on the West Coast trip and in 1902 the family headed to Central Otago where Adamson worked on gold dredges. More than 30 years later

they moved to Greymouth where the couple lived for the rest of their lives.

Photography remained a part of Adamson's life, as he continued to take studio photographs to supplement his income.

Thankfully, much of Adamson's work has been retained – providing the South Canterbury Museum with an important new collection, and as Gallagher describes it, a range of images that is truly unique for that period.

The exhibition will run at the South Canterbury Museum from July 3 to September 12, and it is then planned to send it on tour. There will be an official exhibition opening and book launch on Friday, July 9. *Feeling For Daylight: Photographs of Jack Adamson* will be on sale at the museum for \$44.95.