



**DAVID NEWELL SMITH
discusses his work
with Bryn Campbell**

B.C. Were all these pictures taken for *The Observer* in your three years as staff photographer?

D.N.S. All except the one of the lovers. I get a lot of spare time between jobs so I wander about, round the park and so on. Most subjects I photograph for *The Observer* are so aware I am taking pictures of them. Occasionally it's very nice to get out and photograph people who are unaware of me.

B.C. Almost what one did as an amateur. Walking round photographing people just for the hell of it.

D.N.S. Yes. But if you get right down to it, the best reason for taking photographs is to capture the reflection of your own feelings, of what impresses you most, of what the worthwhile

things in life really are. Very often I get starved of this feeling. One is just working to fill up a space, suit a design or something.

B.C. Do you think it's possible to reconcile this need for expression through photography with one's job as a photographer? Would it be possible on a magazine for instance?

D.N.S. Oh yes. It's obviously much easier with magazine photography. It's very difficult on a newspaper because all the time you've got this feeling of being pushed into different ways of thinking. The way you're combining your own thinking with the newspaper's, with the writer's and perhaps most important of all, with the picture editor's. After you've been doing it for quite a while, instead of getting easier



it becomes more difficult, because you get into a rut. You start thinking . . . well, you *stop* thinking in a sense. Things that shouldn't become reflex actions, are reflex actions. Things that should come from your heart, in fact come from how you think other people are going to react to them. Because you know from previous experience how they've reacted to other things you've done. It's very difficult to know what you really care about and what you think other people are going to care about. For this reason, if for nothing else, it's important to get away now and then to take pictures for yourself, to try to capture what you really feel, of why you originally began to take photographs.

B.C. Often your pictures are chosen and used for reasons having nothing to do

with their qualities as pictures—they have to fit a 2-column, 8 inch deep space for instance, or for other reasons that may at times seem rather bizarre to you. Over a period of time does this tend to cloud your judgment of a photograph?

D.N.S. What it does is give you a feeling there are two choices. There's the paper's choice and your own. If I had to look through one of my jobs and pick the right picture to use, I'd be quite certain of it. When someone else does it and you think that they've chosen the wrong one, you make excuses to yourself, like, that one suits the story better or is a better shape for where it's to be used. But to actually say whether one is right or the other wrong with certainty is very difficult, because you've got these two things

and you can't separate them.

B.C. In other words, because of the very nature of newspaper photography, the sheer necessity of making compromises, it is impossible for one to have an absolute standard of values?

D.N.S. It is impossible! Either you are a fanatic, believing that because of your artistic genius you are right every time and that people should accept your judgment without question or you take a more down to earth attitude and realise you're working for a newspaper and that although you're employed for your own particular ability you've still got to compromise it with the paper you're working for. There are so many people involved, so many ideas, and you are just adding a small part to it.

Also of course I just don't believe that

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my work is so important that I should feel that fanatical. If I did, I shouldn't be working for a newspaper. I'm prepared to compromise. There's a part of me that would like to go away and take photographs 24 hours a day, live and eat photography, work myself up into a lather and imagine I'm a sort of Van Gogh. But the other half says you've got to earn a living, you enjoy taking photographs and if you can find a means of earning money, living comfortably and expressing yourself, then this is the way to work at the moment. I don't think there is anything that important that I can express just now, to justify putting myself in such physical discomfort. But I can understand how some people could feel that strongly. Then there are others I know who claim to feel this way and I'm sure it's just a neurosis. It's very difficult to distinguish between neurosis and the sheer necessity of expressing oneself up to that point. The discomfort of going against the main body instead of floating along with it.

B.C. It's often said that photographers aren't the best judges of their own photographs. Do you agree?

D.N.S. No! They certainly should be if they're any good. Obviously their judgment can be clouded at times but so can a picture editor's. Ideally photographer and picture editor should both have a say in which pictures should be printed up and then they should discuss

which particular one should be used. If the picture editor does all the choosing, the photographer can't possibly be completely involved in his job. If a photographer feels that the wrong pictures are continually being used, it must have a very strong effect on him, even subconsciously. It must have a very damaging effect on his way of thinking on future jobs. One should be totally involved in one's work, with complete trust in one's judgment. If this confidence is undermined, one's work must suffer. How can you divorce the ability to take good pictures and the ability to recognise them? You assume you are employed because of your own particular talent for taking pictures. Obviously ideas and information from other people help you to produce good work. But you are not there as the machine through which other people's ideas are worked out. If you accept this situation your work is bound to deteriorate. Because nobody can sit behind a desk and dream up photographs with any real meaning. That is up to the person who goes out to do the job.

B.C. Is the excitement of newspaper life, the rush and the tensions, part of the pleasure to you of being a photographer?

D.N.S. Ideally I'd like to work on a retainer for a magazine like *Life*. Travel to countries like China and India. Photograph big, exciting, dramatic events, in a completely full and satisfying way. The

most difficult thing now is the hanging around between jobs. I'd prefer to work more fully, more satisfyingly, more often. I get a lot of pleasure out of doing a job, no matter what it is. Simply from overcoming the technical difficulties of doing it. I get extremely fed up with hanging around. After a while, when a job comes up, immediately it clicks into the back of your mind what's entailed. And whether it's going to be a good one or a bad one. One finds oneself saying, 'Oh God, another one,' which is very bad.

But I don't honestly think that I go along to any job without trying to get something different each time. I might take along just a couple of lenses instead of all my gear. To feel freer. To stretch to the limits my ideas with those lenses. I find that the less equipment I use, the more I can concentrate on getting something different. Having a lot of lenses around can get confusing. And you have to lug them about. The extra weight, the extra concern as to where they are. Many occasions I wish I didn't have a camera case or a particular lens or something because it's slowed me down.

B.C. What equipment in fact do you use?

D.N.S. All 35 mm. Nikon F's with a range of lenses from 21-500 mm. I like to work with two bodies and four lenses usually. A 21 mm, not on the camera, a 28, and

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then the 85 or 135 depending on the light. The 85 of course because it's faster. And the 200. I wouldn't take the 500 unless I had a definite idea in mind, because that would really slow me down. A good 50 per cent of jobs depend on being able to run a bit and dodge about. The two lenses I use most are the 28 mm and the 200.

B.C. Getting back to the photograph itself, why did you take it? What's so special about it to you?

D.N.S. I realise that when a photograph really means something to someone, it's usually for very personal reasons. To me it shows a special sensitivity between two people and this is emphasised by the obvious age of the man, the tenderness on his face and in his hand. It's a simple composition sitting in the middle of the picture.

I get very sick of clever techniques. If one could just use a standard lens for everything and get what one wanted. The really important thing in photography is to get something that has some meaning to the photographer, some real meaning, of how one feels, of what one is trying to say. If you can do this with a wide-angle, then fine, but one sees so many pictures these days that are nine-tenths gimmicks, by their distortion or their emphasis. The unusual thing is to see a photograph taken with a standard lens. It looks so extraordinarily attractive.

B.C. But you yourself use the 28 mm lens to a very great extent, as you've said, and yet I think it would be unfair to say it's a gimmick in your case. Why do you use it? What is its especial appeal to you?

D.N.S. I think because I've developed a way of seeing with the 28 mm lens. My eyes see pictures in that kind of frame. I find I can separate the different objects in a picture with a 28 easier than with any other lens. Also I can get in all that I want. I can move in and move out and compose a picture much easier with that lens. With so many photographers on a job today, if you used a standard lens you just wouldn't see what you were photographing. Just get the back of somebody else's head.

B.C. It's dictated by the circumstances of the job as much as by anything else?

D.N.S. Yes but not completely. I like the effect of the 28 mm lens. Look at the photograph of Jo Grimond and Jeremy Thorpe, the way it brings out the relationship between the two men. Sometimes you call this my 28 mm formula, but I think it's a justifiable formula in the circumstances. All the time nowadays you're having to get in closer and closer to stop yourself being crowded out. If one could stand back, one might take a quite different type of picture and be perfectly satisfied. But you've got to get in close.

B.C. Is the depth-of-field of the 28 mm a great attraction to you?

D.N.S. Very much. Most of the news photographs I take I don't focus at all. I use zone focusing. Generally I've got a rough idea of the distance I want beforehand and I make whatever adjustments are needed as I go along. If I had to focus, half of my mind would be on that. I just couldn't completely concentrate on what was in the picture.

B.C. Why don't you use the 21 mm lens instead of the 28 mm lens?

D.N.S. Distortion. Too much risk of people looking just like cardboard cut-outs.

B.C. What about the other extreme, the 200 mm lens? How and when do you use that?

D.N.S. To get a strong head mainly—the Woodrow Wyatt portrait, for instance. That was taken with a 200 plus a close-up lens, working at about 5 ft.

B.C. Why did you crop it in so close? Why not a conventional head and shoulders?

D.N.S. Well that's exactly it. The more conventional you are, the less chance you have of doing the job properly. The whole idea is to get the most original slant you possibly can. Though it's not really original to crop that close, of course. I took several films of him using different lenses until I found that the essential qualities of his face and character came out in just that small area. I think you have to see what the face is capable of from a distance and

then move in close when you know the result you want. Of course you wouldn't move in close for every portrait. For instance, if he had particularly expressive hands or a certain way of sitting or standing. If you are with a person long enough, you'll notice something that stands out a little more strongly than his other mannerisms. Then you move in to isolate it as clearly and accurately as you can.

B.C. The other portrait, the one of Twiggy, seems a much more formal shot. One doesn't have the feeling that the character was intercepted. She's put on that face for you as it were.

D.N.S. Twiggy is always having to put on a face. In her job she's more an abstraction than an actual person. She's a product of the photographer's imagination. I've tried to suggest this by increasing the contrast to emphasise the lines of the composition, the oval shapes that blend into each other giving an overall abstract effect.

B.C. Obviously this picture depends to a very great extent on the way in which it's printed, the degree of contrast. Was this effect in your mind when you took the picture or did it come to you later when you saw the original print?

D.N.S. I had the idea before I actually started taking any pictures. The lighting was already very contrasty, which perhaps suggested the effect. It was just a question then of emphasising the contrast.

B.C. You might say it's relatively easy in portraiture to isolate the basic elements of a picture. It's far more difficult in news photography, your principal concern these days. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why I am so fascinated by your 'Hogmanay Hangover' picture, the man on a bench in George Square, Glasgow, on New Year's Eve.

D.N.S. The square was deserted except for this one man looking very pathetic. It was obvious it would make a strong picture. It's easier to isolate a subject at night. You can generally use silhouettes to great advantage. It's so important in newspaper photography to get something with immediate visual impact.





B.C. One gets the same feeling of very selective composition from the police murder hunt pictures, the detectives searching for clues outside Wormwood Scrubs.

D.N.S. That was taken with a long lens, 300 mm, to compress the distance and bring up the prison to fill the background behind the policemen and to bunch them up.

B.C. What looked very good in *The Observer* was the long thin line of policemen searching in the early morning.

D.N.S. Yes, they used it right across the full width of the front page. It was taken about 6 a.m. in fact. The actual shooting happened the day before, late in the afternoon. I'd been on another job and by the time I got to the scene it was all over. We guessed they would be looking for bullets the following day when the light was better. Since they would naturally prefer searching without a crowd around, it seemed a fair bet they would start early in the morning. Nobody else turned up that early so I got the pictures exclusively.

B.C. Your job as a news photographer takes you to all manner of scenes of disaster and personal tragedy. This murder hunt, Aberfan, the Yugoslavian air disaster, and so on. How do you feel about photographing such situations?

D.N.S. I feel very awkward and bad about it, on a job like Aberfan. Not so much the murder hunt because the tragedy had already happened. I am very sensitive to other people's feelings and grief. It can become very embarrassing. You begin to think you shouldn't be there or if you are, you ought to be doing something to help the people who are suffering. You begin to wonder whether what you are doing, just taking pictures, has any value. The people you are photographing don't seem to think so. To me, Aberfan typified one of the most upsetting things about being a newspaper photographer. There was so much suffering, then suddenly there were hordes of photographers clamouring for pictures, without seemingly caring about what had happened. They just wanted to photograph the sensation of it, to produce marvellous pictures. I felt very upset by what had happened. I found I had to shut my mind off continually from what I was doing, from the horror of it. I felt that it was a private thing, that people should be left to suffer in peace and that we shouldn't be there. But at the same time I was there and everybody else was. What I was doing couldn't make very much difference with everybody else there who was photographing. But there was something more to it than that, another very strong feeling. It summed up the whole reason for being a newspaper photographer. There was so much of meaning there to photograph.

You had these two very strong feelings battling inside you. One, you saw something that you badly wanted to photograph. Two, you felt fantastically inhibited about photographing it because you didn't want to upset anybody's feelings. All the time during the whole day I was there I was suffering from this and missing quite a lot because of it.

B.C. Have you put your feelings into perspective by now? Would you go down and do the same job again if necessary?

D.N.S. Oh yes, and do it much better.

B.C. Why? Simply because you're more used now to this degree of tragedy?

D.N.S. I think that's it. More experience. It teaches you how to shut your mind off from things which would prevent you from getting what you want. But it's important to feel and to suffer and to realise what's going on. That way you can produce great pictures. Instead of blasting away into the middle of things, shooting pictures without really understanding what the people are going through. It's a question of striking a balance between the sensitivity of your feelings and sufficient control to enable you to do your job.

B.C. Do you think that any photographs you might take, however good, can justify your presence at a disaster if it increases



the suffering of those involved or hinders the rescue operations?

D.N.S. I don't think I can answer that because I just don't know. I've thought about it a great deal. I think there are many things in life that you can't give an answer to because it's just a question of compromise and doing the best you can with things the way they are. But at the same time, if there's any point in being a photographer or having newspapers, then I think that doing a subject like Aberfan would be one of the main reasons for having them.

Obviously the publicity helps to show the world the horrible disasters that can happen and perhaps helps to prevent them happening again. At the same time this doesn't in any way help one to say for certain that this is adequate justification. It's just a way of trying to justify it.

B.C. It's very difficult, as you know, to draw the line between the responsible publication of a disaster photograph and outright sensationalism. Does this worry you at all? The fact that it's not just your

own motives that are in question but even more so, the motives of the people publishing your pictures?

D.N.S. That's one reason why I work for *The Observer*. If I worked for one or two other newspapers I'd be worrying about this all the time. But I feel pretty safe with *The Observer* on this score. When I covered the Yugoslavian air disaster I had photographs of real horror and they wouldn't use them. I don't think they've ever published anything by me or anybody else which I've resented. Their conscience is probably even more tender than mine. Sometimes I think they're too careful.

B.C. Perhaps there are occasions when one should use horror pictures. But the more often you use them, the quicker the public became inured to their effect.

D.N.S. I don't know whether this story is strictly relevant but I think so. The other week I was in a shop and I heard some commotion outside. An old man had suddenly collapsed in the middle of the

pavement. People were just walking by him lying there. Looking at him and walking on. It was some time before anybody bothered to stop and see what was wrong with him.

When I went out and saw people gathering around him, putting a coat under his head and so on, I was struck by the fact that it was more like something out of a television play than real life. There is so much horror and sensation created for people to sit and look at and absorb, so much drama that is unreal and so little in people's real lives that when something actually happens to them they just watch and try and blank their minds off from becoming involved.

This is very frightening. It was one of the feelings that was very strong in me at Aberfan. As though it wasn't really happening, something dreamed up by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer with me in the camera crew. The shock every now and again of realising it was happening. My mind had difficulty in reconciling these spasms of realisation with the fact that I was trying to compose some dramatic scene in my camera.





B.C. The whole business of being in newspapers helps to increase this feeling of unreality. The very processing of news. It used to upset me sometimes on the picture-desk. Undoubtedly it corrupts.

However much you enjoy news photography, it must make a pleasant change for you to tackle the occasional interesting feature assignment?

D.N.S. I enjoy doing everything. But outside news I particularly like photographing ballet, plays or films. It offers a completely different kind of picture, generally far more dramatic, and with more control over the elements involved. I can stretch my feelings and thoughts in a different way, which I like.

B.C. This ballet picture certainly has a very striking visual quality, with a certain feeling of mystery.

D.N.S. The subject itself was mysterious. It was a modern ballet. The lighting was very strong, very contrasty. It was relatively easy to work the people, the tones and the shapes into semi-abstract forms. At the same time the idea was to bring out the importance of Merce Cunningham in this ballet company. I hope the picture does these two things, shows form in movement and focuses attention on Cunningham.

B.C. Finally, can you imagine yourself doing anything you would enjoy more or be better at than photography?

D.N.S. No! There is nothing I would rather do than take photographs. I don't know why exactly but to me it is completely satisfying in every way.

