

Frank Hurley

Locomotive photographer



Hurley's image simply titled 'Power' is shown here as originally reproduced in *Photographing Locomotives*, 1911. Original image by Frank Hurley, Hawkesbury train, with smoke, emerging from a tunnel, [nla.pic-an23817472](#), reproduced with permission of the National Library of Australia.

In a well-known Australian railway internet forum, I took part in a brief debate about whether digital post-processing represented some form of cheating, and one that might not have been available before digital imagery became common-place. During the discussion, reference was made to the 'composite' images that Frank Hurley had made in the early 20th century, demonstrating that the technique was hardly new, even if the process had changed dramatically.

I've been fascinated with Hurley's work for a long time, but this reference prompted me to go to the local library to find out more of the man and his work. In Alasdair McGregor's wonderful *Frank Hurley—A Photographer's Life* much about Hurley, his attitude to life and of course his photography is revealed. Frank Hurley: photographer, pioneer cinematographer, adventurer, explorer, self-promoter, businessman, showman, railway photographer.

Railway photographer?

Yes. Hurley, having discovered at an early age that photography could be both a passion and a source of income, made his justifiable name as a photographer after two Antarctic expeditions and then went on to make memorable and haunting images from both World Wars. He was also a successful commercial photographer right up to his death in 1962.

Having decided that photography could provide the kind of life he wanted, Frank Hurley soon gained employment in one of Sydney's photographic studios around 1904. Although it might seem hard to believe now, a lucrative but very competitive market existed for post cards, and studios worked hard to stand out from the crowd. Having become a partner in another studio, Hurley then threw himself into this business with the sense of style and bravado that would mark much of his life. Ever on the lookout for innovative techniques and subjects, Hurley created a set of postcards known as his *Power and Speed* series.

Luckily, McGregor's book makes a reference to a short article, *Photographing Locomotives*, which Hurley himself wrote for the Australasian Photo-Review in 1911. The article, accompanied

by two photos *Power* and *Speed*, provides advice to other photographers who might also have wanted to turn their lenses to locomotives as their subject. From the viewpoint of almost a century later, it provides an interesting, and somewhat troubling, insight into the attitudes to safety that prevailed at the time. Needless to say much of the following, drawn as it is directly from Hurley's article, is completely inappropriate in today's environment—and indeed it probably was in 1911 as well.

At almost the same time that *Photographing Locomotives* was published another journal, *The Lone Hand*, also printed five of Hurley's railway photographs under the banner of *Power and Speed*. The five photos included the two that appeared in *Photographing Locomotives* and three others, two that may have been taken in the same general location and on the same day.

Photographing Locomotives opens brightly: "To those on the look-out for excitement with a camera I can recommend no other branch of the 'black art' more calculated to satisfy their desires than the photography of locomotives in motion. In addition to providing sport that is as full of uncertainty as aeroplaning, one can, by this means of photographing engines, truly portray their tremendous speed and power characteristics."

Hurley then clearly indicates his enthusiasm for action shots rather than what we might today call a roster shot: "A picture of a stationary locomotive compared to one taken while travelling up to 60 miles an hour shows up flat and uninteresting" ... an opinion that would still generate debate among those who actually enjoy 'roster' shots!

Before describing his technique for photographing locomotives, Hurley also provides some general advice: "Before taking up this highly interesting sport, however, there are two or three things which must be done before success will yield to our persuasions. A permit to trespass on the lines must be obtained, and a careful study made of engines at rest. Notice how the angle of view alters the whole composition ... This preparatory study of engine anatomy must not be considered lightly, as intelligent preparation is the only formula which will develop real pictures." The reference to permits is puzzling, since as you will shortly learn, Hurley's claim was to literally stand in the middle of the track in the path of his chosen subject. It is hard to imagine anyone ever being permitted to engage in such behaviour, even in 1911. However, the reference to intelligent preparation holds as true today as it did in 1911 and perhaps his reference to "formula which will develop real pictures" is a small in-joke as much about darkroom processes as it is about his camera technique.

Hurley clearly anticipates that photographers who try his yet-to-be described approach might get something of a shock as a speeding train bears down on them: "The first sensations caused by exposing a plate in the very face of a coming express are nerve-trying indeed, and, while 'dare-devilry' will go a long way toward getting the best results, it is just as well, by selecting the most suitable outfit, to minimise risks as much as possible." Given the approach that Hurley uses, suggesting photographers try to minimise risks seems gratuitous in the extreme.

Having gone through these preliminaries, Hurley then sets out the approach, which warrants reproducing in some detail: "A careful selection is first made for position ... A small stone is placed on the rails a few feet behind where we wish our engine to come, and carefully focussed ... When ready to make the exposure, set up the camera between the rails, plant the feet firmly in the best position for jumping, and then make sure that there is nothing to prevent the jump being accomplished successfully. Then, as the train approaches, and the moment for snapping draws near, watch the stone on the rails till the wheels of the engine grind over it. Then 'shoot the shutter' and spring for your life. The engine will be less than the length of a rail from you by this time, and no hesitation must be made. Above all, remember I have advised you to watch the stone. DO NOT WATCH THE ENGINE. If you do you will find it impossible to correctly judge distance, and the papers will probably record another obituary notice."

Hurley then goes on to suggest acquiring a familiarity with timetables to avoid surprises when photographing in or near tunnels. He notes, again perhaps gratuitously, that if an unexpected movement does arrive, not to panic and that it "may be that only extreme presence of mind will prevent a catastrophe."

Obviously none of the Hurley technique described in the 1911 article can be considered seriously today. The acts of trespass of course are illegal while the whole 'dare-devilry' approach is simply too dangerous to even contemplate.

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Photographing Locomotives

Interestingly, McGregor suggests that Hurley's very adeptness at using this technique was the reason *Photographing Locomotives* was written. I'm not so sure. While his alleged technique has to be dismissed as anything other than a historical curiosity, having spent some time looking at his *Power and Speed* series I really wonder whether Hurley himself used the approach as he implied.

Consider the evidence. Of the five published photos available from the era, only one shows an oncoming train photographed in the way Hurley describes. The remainder are much more conventional. Certainly most required risk, for example Hurley would have been standing on the other track with his back to any oncoming train, but they are not examples of what Hurley described. Many more examples of his work can be found on-line at the National Library of Australia, but of those available, only that one image fits Hurley's description of his extremely dangerous technique.

Interestingly, one of his daughters, Toni, collaborated in preparing recollections of Hurley's career and life. In that book, his experiences along the Hawkesbury River are recounted quite differently to the implications of his *Photographing Locomotives* article. Toni suggests that her father indeed took the photo as described, but he had a very close call capturing the image. Nowhere in Toni's book is there a suggestion it was his standard technique, but was used to capture a view that 'would test the nerves of his competitors.'

Why then did he write *Photographing Locomotives* suggesting the technique as a general approach for others to adopt, rather than simply a tale of a one-off adventure with a successful and impressive result? The answer I suspect was partly due to the commercial realities of the day, and also the nature of the man himself, which would become clearer as time passed.

Alan Shaw

If the post-card business was both lucrative and competitive, then those in the business would naturally be looking for views that would excite the general public. Speeding locomotives that not only looked imposing, but with the very act of recording the action implying personal danger, would have fit the bill perfectly.

Hurley's life would quickly show a history of self-promotion, sufficient to make the most of both his prodigious talent with a camera and future business growth. Building a reputation for himself amongst the photographic community as one who had the technical skills, the creative talent and the personal courage to do whatever it took to get the shot may well have been a very bankable commodity in 1911. The article thus becomes less one of education and inspiration for others, than one of self-promotion for Hurley.

We can also consider that even allowing for Hurley's knack for exaggeration, anyone taking such a shot from "less than the length of a rail" in front of a locomotive going at say just 30 km/h would have less than two seconds to clear the track. Possible perhaps—but unlikely especially considering the bulky equipment of the day. An alternative explanation is that there was no 'dare-devilry' required at all; rather, Hurley the consummate charmer had worded up the train crew in advance and the train was moving only as fast as required to give the impression of steam and smoke bursting out of the tunnel. Hurley's adventure in reality was thus very tame and controlled—but nothing a subsequent article could not be used to create an impression of a young photographer willing to take risks to record memorable images.



Given all this, there might be two possibilities that led to the train emerging from the tunnel being successfully recorded. I can imagine that Hurley was out one pleasant sunny day on the banks of the Hawkesbury River and its surrounds. As trains went by he diligently recorded them for his business as examples of both speed and power in an imposing landscape. At some point he may well have set up in the path of the train. Pleased to have got the image, but possibly shaken by the near-miss that might have eventuated, even the brave Hurley did not attempt to repeat it. Sitting down by the side of the tracks to recover his wits after his near-death experience, he realised he may have inadvertently sown a seed for his personal self-promotion, as well as capturing a memorable image. Arriving back in his Sydney studios the results matched his expectations, especially the photo of the train bearing down on him. It occurred to him that as well as earning income as post-cards, a story recounting how he captured them, suitably embellished, would do no harm to a man in the thick of the business of the competitive post-card trade. Alternatively, the whole scene was stage-managed with the cooperation of the train crew and an altogether more relaxed photograph was captured—but again the resulting image could be used to illustrate a much more thrilling account of how to replicate it.

There is of course no way of knowing for sure about this, but the themes of great skill, artistry, daring and subsequent self-promotion and embellishment emerge throughout Hurley's life. I now look at that photo of a loco emerging from a tunnel and think that, if taken literally, fate could have taken a different turn that day on the Hawkesbury River, such that the anonymous locomotive may well have ended the life of an ambitious photographer, and deprived Australia of an enormous legacy. Alternatively, the image and the *Photographing Locomotives* article might be seen as a very dangerous and misleading exercise in self-promotion, with potentially deadly consequences if some trusting photographer followed the Hurley prescription, only to be recorded as 'another obituary notice.'

Further information

If anyone wants to view more of Frank Hurley's railway photography, and it is far more comprehensive than just those I have described here, the best way to do so online is to go to the Picture Australia web site: www.pictureaustralia.org then go to the Search page and from there the Advanced Search page, then search for railway photographs taken by Frank Hurley. As of June 2009, there are at least 161 such images to view.

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References

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Hurley's image simply titled 'Energy', shown here as originally reproduced in *Photographing Locomotives*, 1911. Original image by Frank Hurly, The Hawkesbury train passing over a bridge, nla.pic-an23817471, reproduced with permission of the National Library of Australia.