

Dear Dad...  
Brian Brake  
writes home  
to his father,  
Jack Brake.

This article draws on 20 postcards from a private collection which have only recently come to light, written by New Zealand-born photographer Brian Brake to his father Jack Brake in the 1950s, and therefore during the years when he was establishing himself as a photo-journalist. Although the collection is not large in number, the messages written on the backs of these postcards provide a wonderful opportunity to locate Brian Brake's whereabouts during these years and retrace the significant events in his life at this time in his own words. Importantly, the postcards cover the critical period immediately prior to Brake undertaking the filming of his remarkable visual documentary, *Monsoon*, in India during the northern summer months of 1960. It would be this assignment that would establish his name as a world-class photo-journalist.

Keywords: #Brian Brake #postcards #New Zealand photographer #photo-journalist #documentary.

Twenty postcards sent by the celebrated New Zealand photographer Brian Brake to his father Jack Brake in the 1950s, have recently come to light from within a private collection.<sup>1</sup> Although not large in number, there is reason to believe that they may be representative of a far more comprehensive correspondence between the two.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, these postcards may prove to be of considerable interest to researchers, when as R.E. Martinez argues, so much has been lost, since the postcards provide an opportunity to retrace events in Brian Brake's life as they unfold and in his own words, at a critical period in his career as a burgeoning photo-journalist.<sup>3</sup>

As I have already noted, the postcards were all addressed to Brian's father, John Samuel Brake (1878-1961). This may suggest that in spite of the physical distance between Brian and his father, Jack, half a world away in New Zealand, he was in fact never far from his mind. But they may also demonstrate a genuine desire on Brian's part to share his new experiences with him. Hence, the present discussion will go beyond reviewing the events covered in the postcards and also consider aspects of Brian's relationship with his father during these years.

#### THE EARLY YEARS – JACK BRAKE, ARTHUR'S PASS

In written accounts of Brian's life, his adoptive father, Jack Brake, is usually described as the 'storekeeper' of the small hamlet of Arthur's Pass in inland Canterbury. However, this does not sufficiently reflect the role Brake Senior was expected to carry out in his capacity as the registered licensee of the general store. He was contracted to the then Ministry of Public Works to supply essential goods and services to the local work force throughout the years of the construction of the Otira railway tunnel, from 1908 until it was officially opened in 1923.<sup>4</sup> During this period it has been estimated that there were some 300 workers accommodated at the camp set up at Bealey Flat. On the completion of the tunnel, along with continuing his responsibilities of supplying goods to the local community, Brake Senior took on further duties. For instance, with the transition from the era of the stage coach and horses to regular train services and the need for stabling having ceased, he assumed the position of station master. This was one that would take up more of his time as freight from the West Coast increased. In addition, when Arthur's Pass was designated a national park in 1929, and as interest among the public in recreational activities in the area grew, his business further expanded.

At the time Jack Brake and his wife Jane (Jennie) adopted the baby son of their niece Margaret on her death in 1927, they were well into their middle years. Yet having done so Brian's welfare became the couple's priority. So when Brian reached school age, in what they saw as the child's best interests, it was agreed that Jenny Brake would move to live in Christchurch. To this end the Brakes had a bungalow built in Blighs Road, in the suburb of Papanui. Brian attended the nearby Waimairi primary school and then went on to attend Christchurch Boys' High School. He was also a member of the congregation of St Paul's Anglican Church, in Papanui, and active in their bible class.

Nonetheless, Brian usually spent his school holidays at Arthur's Pass. It was during these sojourns that he developed his love of the mountains and acquired an intimate knowledge of them. Significantly, it was also while at Arthur's Pass that he was introduced to photography. Certain members of Brian's extended family were already amateur enthusiasts, some were members of the Christchurch Photographic Society and probably also encouraged Brian to join when in his teens.<sup>5</sup> However it was the local park ranger, Charlie Warden, who taught him the necessary skills. Brian recalls how, as only a youngster, he began assisting Warden with the colouring of his black and white lantern slides in preparation for lectures to the public. Warden went on to show Brian how to take photographs, and how to develop them. By the age of 16 Brian had made up his mind that he would become a photographer. It was at this time his father's help became crucial in fulfilling his adopted son's expressed aspirations. Evidence of an invoice detailing the purchase of a Klimax half-plate camera from Warden dated 8 September 1942 for £5 is perhaps indicative of the way in which Jack Brake was prepared to support his son to achieve his ambitions.<sup>6</sup> Several accounts also mention his father's assistance in facilitating the arrangements for Brian to enter the studio of the then leading Wellington portrait photographer Spencer Digby in 1945. One of the values of the postcards is that they clearly demonstrate that Brian was appreciative of his father's assistance and his messages on his postcards reflect this. But beyond this, in terms of the tone of address in the postcards, it is clear that there was a genuine degree of warmth and affection between the two.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1. Teal Flying Boat postcard, July 1951.

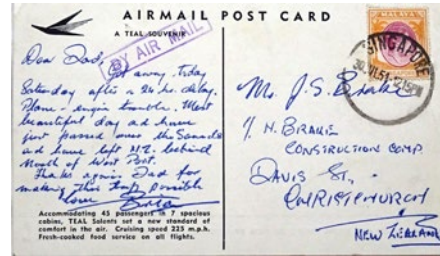


Figure 2. Message written on the Teal postcard, July 1951.

### THE POSTCARDS AND WHAT THEY REVEAL

The earliest postcard in this collection dates from July 1951. By this date Jack Brake, now a widower and approaching seventy, had retired to a small block of family land in Brake St, Christchurch.<sup>8</sup> It was here he was living throughout the period of the correspondence between Brian and his father, and which only ceased on the latter's death on 23 March 1961. In this early postcard Brian informs his father how, after a delay of 24 hours, the flying boat operated by TEAL has finally taken off on the first leg of his trip to England to take up a travelling scholarship from the British Council to study colour cinematography (Fig. 1). While, no doubt relieved, yet excited, to be under way, as the flying boat ascends over the west coast of the South Island heading towards the Tasman Sea, Brian has already taken out a pen to write a brief message to his father. This was on the back of an in-flight souvenir TEAL postcard, and he described to him the scene below, and also thanked him for helping to make the trip possible (Fig. 2). At this particular period air travel was comparatively expensive. Therefore, it would have been unusual for recipients of a British Council scholarship to travel by air. A newspaper report outlining his itinerary confirms just how ambitious it was.<sup>9</sup> It emphasizes that in all probability Brian certainly would have required additional assistance with the funding of his travel costs.

The experience of travelling in the United Kingdom and Europe was formative. It left Brian determined that when the opportunity arose he would return to further his career as a photographer. In 1954 Brian quit his job as cameraman with the National Film Unit and headed overseas to gain work experience. This time it was by sea. (Thus, there

was an interval of three years before the correspondence between Brian and his father resumed.) On his arrival at the port of Genoa, Italy, on 23 July 1954, Brian pens a postcard to his father to tell him of his safe arrival and to thank him for his letter. He also tells him how he took the opportunity to purchase a new lens for his camera while berthed at Aden. Then, within weeks, in yet another postcard, Brian informs his father that he has had to make an unexpected change in his plans in order to travel to Scotland for the screening of the films *Snows of Aorangi* and *The Snowline is their Boundary* at the Edinburgh Film Festival.<sup>10</sup> And, although Brian had expressed serious reservations about executive interference in the production of films while he was working with the National Film Unit, this sentiment is not evident in his written comments on the postcard.<sup>11</sup> Rather, he relays to his father his sense of elation at the favourable reception of these films by the critics. He writes 'Skiing film screened yesterday and again tonight,' and he declares that they have been 'Very well received and high praise for my photography. Am very thrilled indeed.'

Of course, the number of different postmarks which feature on these postcards bear witness to the 'jetsetter' lifestyle that soon became part Brake's way of life after he was admitted, first as an associate and then as a full member to the Paris-based photo agency Magnum Corporation in 1956 and 1957, respectively. In the course of fulfilling various assignments in the first years of his association with the agency he was travelling constantly. The postmarks on postcards include destinations as far afield as Morocco and Nigeria in Africa, to Nice and Salzburg in Europe, Aden and Lebanon in the Middle East and Moscow, capital of the then Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it was the assignments which Henri Cartier-Bresson, who had already travelled extensively in Asia from the late 1940s, encouraged Brian Brake to undertake, which would prove to be of crucial importance in establishing his name as a photo-journalist.

Many of these assignments were made in the company of his then life-companion, dentist and aspiring journalist, Nigel Cameron (1920-2017), with whom Brian collaborated extensively from the mid-1950s. Apparently, Brake had met Cameron at the Players' Theatre in London, on his initial visit to England in 1951. Cameron must have understood the deep frustration Brian felt, after coming halfway round the world, only to be thwarted because as a non-union member he could not find work, and he did his utmost to promote Brake. For instance, John Turner relates the rather nice story of how Cameron offered Brake the use of the walls of his professional rooms in London to exhibit his photographs.<sup>13</sup>

Soon after Brake had become officially associated with Magnum the two men implemented their plan to spend a year travelling to several countries in the Middle East and Asia. Cameron would prove the ideal travelling companion for Brake. To begin with he was familiar with this part of the world, having been stationed in the Far East while serving in the Royal Navy during the World War 2, and subsequently he had been involved in the post-war reconstruction in Singapore. He also harboured a strong desire to return. Brake outlines on yet another postcard to his father their plans first to visit Egypt and Yemen, then to travel on through Ceylon, Singapore and Hong Kong, before continuing on to Australia for the Melbourne Olympics from 22 November-8 December 1956 and then over to New Zealand.<sup>14</sup> While he was back in New Zealand, Brake planned to cover the visit of the Duke of Edinburgh during the second week of December. This particular assignment included a sequence of images of the duke with Sir Edmund Hillary on the wharf at the port of Lyttelton, prior to embarking on their trip to the Antarctic.

#### MIDDLE EAST AND ASIA

Brake and Cameron arrived in Yemen in mid-1956. First, they spent some time in Aden before venturing into the interior of the country to the area round the Hadhramaut Valley. A more detailed account of this part of their journey was described in a chapter of the book written by Cameron entitled *To the East a Phoenix*, published in 1960.<sup>15</sup> It included an incident that occurred while they were staying in Hadhramaut, whereby a young girl had to be operated on after falling down a well. Selected images that Brake had taken during the course of the medical treatment she received from resident doctor, Dr Eva Hoeck, formed an early photo-essay which Brake published in *Illustrated* in September 1956.<sup>16</sup> Brian also informs his father how during their stay they had been able to make a number of flights with the RAF then stationed in the country. From their time with the Royal Air Force comes the memorable close up shot of the contrasting cultures of the camel driver juxtaposed with the jetfighter pilot. It is noteworthy that more recently, from all the thousands of images available, it was this one that was selected as the cover image for the in depth review of Brian Brake and his contribution to photography prepared by Te Papa Tongarewa to accompany the exhibition *Brian Brake: Lens on the World* in 2010. Brian made his initial visit to mainland China with Nigel Cameron on their return journey to the northern hemisphere in April 1957. Of course, at this stage China was largely still 'closed' to foreigners, therefore, as Brian explained to his



Figure 3. Postcard of houseboats on Lake Nagin, Kashmir.

father on a postcard written on their arrival, their plan was to work on subjects close at hand in the capital such as 'the children of Beijing,' and 'scenes of Spring'.<sup>17</sup> However, as Cameron relates, due to an unexpected encounter with Chou en Lai the pair were able to gain access to people and places to which they had not originally anticipated.<sup>18</sup> And, although as Brake later recalls, that wherever they went in China the pair of them were always accompanied by guides, he also said that he was able to produce some images which were, in his estimation, to be some of his best.<sup>19</sup> And as a result of their extensive tour of the mainland of China both Cameron and Brake came to the realization that their visit had provided them enough material to put together what would be their first book to be produced in collaboration, *The Chinese Smile* — with Cameron responsible for the text and Brake the photographic images.<sup>20</sup>

Following their successful tour of China, Brake and Cameron travelled on to Nagin Bagh, in the vale of Kashmir in northern India, arriving before the end of May. Here they remained for about three weeks. Brian describes to his father how while they are in Kashmir they are staying on a luxurious houseboat moored on Lake Nagin (Fig. 3). It's worth pointing out that since their visit to New Zealand, where Cameron presumably had the opportunity to meet Brian's father, the postcards



Figure 4. Message on Lake Nagin postcard signed by Nigel Cameron and Brian Brake.



Figure 5. Brian Brake image of Kashmiri woman in a local skiff.

sent after that date were often signed, as in this case, as being from both Brian and Nigel (Fig. 4). This suggests that during their visit to New Zealand a real connection had been made between Cameron and Brake's father. Further, I believe that it is significant that following Jack Brake's death in March 1961, Brian and Nigel made the decision to dedicate their forthcoming collaborative project on the Chinese capital city entitled '*Peking: a tale of three cities*', to his memory.

Once again a written account of their activities in Kashmir was developed by Cameron into another chapter for the book that he and Brake were then currently working on, *To the East a Phoenix*. For instance, concerning the houseboat where they stayed while in Kashmir named the *Triumph*, Cameron notes one of the advantages of this type of accommodation in comparison with a hotel, besides the constant cool breezes from across the water, is that guests can fully take in the majesty of panorama before them. Cameron also goes on to describe more about the geography of the region — which to him appeared to be a seemingly endless network of lakes and interconnecting canals.

Brake and Cameron did engage in some energetic activities while in Kashmir. For example, Cameron described how they joined the Sahdus on their pilgrimage into the mountains to Amarnath. They also took the opportunity to visit the historic terraced-gardens renowned for their water features, notably Nishat Bagh near Shalimar created by the mogul Asif Khan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and the subject of an article which Cameron and Brake collaborated on for *National Geographic*.<sup>21</sup> In addition, they also greatly benefitted from whiling away many pleasant hours skimming over the water and meandering along the canals in a skihara, a local flat-bottomed boat characteristic to this region, and just poking round places nearby to familiarize themselves with their immediate surroundings in the company of their local guide, Ahmed Wanghoo, whom both men found agreeable and knowledgeable.

On one occasion the party of Wanghoo, Cameron and Brake in their skihara became stalled in the heavily congested waterway, the Jhelum near Srinagar, and this gave rise to a scene that Cameron would subsequently remember as one of 'interminable labour, picturesque, and also excruciatingly terrible in terms of [the] human struggle for a living'.<sup>22</sup> Brake, with his cameras slung round his neck at the ready, and an eye for the good angle, took one of those memorable images for which he has become renowned. It was of a local Kashmiri woman shown in profile, reaching out with a long pole, her sari falling forward, as she skillfully propels the loaded skiff forward (Fig. 5). Significantly, as the shutter closed, Brake was able to juxtapose this active figure with the

seemingly spent figure of the man, on the left of the image, and thereby capture the contrast between the two.

Recently, Vinayak Razdan has drawn attention to the fact that Cartier-Bresson had taken almost the same scene when he was working on location in India in 1947, but, as he points out on comparing the two images, Cartier-Bresson's photograph was taken from a higher angle.<sup>23</sup> This poses the interesting question as to whether Brake was actually aware of Cartier-Bresson's photograph of a decade earlier. If so, did Brake then seek out the same scene that Cartier-Bresson had previously taken as an exercise, or as Razdan suggests, as a tribute to Cartier-Bresson by seeking to recreate it? Certainly, as Razdan states, the subject matter is strikingly similar and hence, this could put the subjects of Brake's Kashmiri photographs in a new context.

Brake's image of the Kashmiri woman was originally included with a selection of Brake's photographs in *To the East a Phoenix* under the descriptive title 'Poling transport boats'. Since then, this photograph has continued to be widely reproduced: for example it was included in the retrospective exhibition organized by Te Papa and in the accompanying book, as 'Kashmir, 1957,' and it was also selected for *Monsoon*, in the chapter on the Flood. It has, thus, become disassociated from its specific origins.<sup>24</sup>

#### TOWARDS MONSOON

His time spent in Kashmir would provide Brian Brake with so much original visual material for his camera and would eventually inspire him to bring his images of these places and their people to a wider audience. Gael Newton outlines in some detail the process taken by Brake towards formulating his ideas and the lengths he went to, to develop a working plan for his project on the *Monsoon*.<sup>25</sup> It would entail on-going discussions with Cameron, also consulting with his colleagues Cartier-Bresson and Ernst Haas from Magnum as well as time spent in practical experimentation, and this clearly demonstrates how Brake prepared for this assignment with considerable care. For instance, Brake went out into the field to experience the rainy season in Yunnan province, while visiting China in 1959.

Some three years after he had first travelled to Kashmir with Cameron, Brake would return to India during the summer months of June-August 1960, to begin filming his remarkable visual photo-essay, *Monsoon*, which would establish his name as a world-class photo-

journalist. In one of the final postcards of the group of twenty, Brian wrote to his father from Zurich in Switzerland while en route to India, to let him know that finally, he was on his way:

*Zurich 3/6/60*

*Dear Dad,*

*Just flown in from Paris en route to Bombay – India. I stay in India for three months to photograph the MOONSOON [sic] RAINS.*

*Love Brian*

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10. Postcard dated 7 September, 1954, private collection, Christchurch.

11. For example, see newspaper cutting from *NZ Herald*, 12 March, 1957, Te Aka Matua, Te Papa Library Art File.

12. Jennifer Twist, curator of the Brian Brake archive at Te Papa, made a tally of the 10 passports issued since 1951 and estimates that Brake visited at least 44 countries, and in some instances on a number of different occasions. Jennifer Twist, *Brian Brake's life told through his passports*, blog dated 26 June, 2017.

13. Athol McCredie, 'Introduction', *Brian Brake: Lens on the World*, Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, 2010, p. 9.

14. Postcard dated 17 August, 1956, private collection, Christchurch.

15. Nigel Cameron, *To the East a Phoenix*, Hutchinson, London, 1960, pp. 9-40.

16. *Illustrated*, 22 September, 1956.

17. Postcard dated 5 April, 1957, private collection, Christchurch.

18. Obituary, Nigel Cameron, Hong Kong art critic. *South China Morning Post*, 16 February, 2017.

19. Eve Arnold, Introduction, *Brian Brake, China - The 1950s*, Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa, 1995, np.

20. Brake's images of the May Day celebrations in Beijing in 1957 are perhaps the most noteworthy. *The Chinese Smile* was published by Hutchinson's in 1958. It was republished by Oxford University Press in paperback in 1990.

21. Nigel Cameron and Brian Brake, 'The Emperor Private Gardens, Paradise after on Earth, *National Geographic*, vol. 114, no. 55, 1958, pp. 606-647.

22. Nigel Cameron, *To the East a Phoenix*, p. 63.

23. Vinayak Razdan, See blog entitled 'A Beautiful Chain of Borrowed Beautiful Images,' 20 January 2017; <https://www.searchkashmir.org/2013/01/a-beautiful-chain-of-borrowed-beautiful.htm>

24. John B. Turner, 'The Roving Photo-journalist, 1954-1959', *Brian Brake: Lens on the World*, p. 114; Brian Brake, *Monsoon*, text by Edmund Hillary, Deben Bhattacharya, Subodh Mukherji and Asoke Roy Chowdhury, Bateman, New Zealand, 2007, p. 165.

25. Gael Newton, 'The Colour Photo Essay 1960-1980,' *Brian Brake: Lens on the World*, pp.169-244.

## ENDNOTES

1. The first postcard dates from 30 July, 1951; the last, 30 December, 1960.

2. References to other correspondence in the postcards gives me every reason to believe that these postcards are representative of a larger body of correspondence.

3. R.E. Martinez, 'Brian Brake: selection from a travel notebook,' *Camera*, June 1960, pp. 4-14.

4. Deed signed between John Brake and the New Zealand Ministry of Public Works, CA000852, Te Papa Tongarewa archives.

5. Conversation with the Brake family historian, Wayne Marriott, 2017.

6. Note of purchase, dated 8 September, 1942, CA000852, Te Papa Tongarewa archives.

7. Brian always signed his postcards to his father with 'love'.

8. Jennie Brake died quite suddenly on 24 August, 1942.

9. Newspaper cutting from Te Papa archives *Cameraman Gains Latest Information*, 16 December, 1951, CA000852, Te Papa Tongarewa archives.