



FEATURE

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A TRUE
PIONEER

Persuading the art establishment that photography wasn't the enemy was tough in the 1950s and 60s. Thankfully, **Joseph McKenzie** had the talent and tenacity to put forward a convincing case. Tracy Calder talks to his son, **Frank McKenzie**, about his legacy.

Joseph McKenzie experienced true hardship as a child. His mother would make ends meet by cleaning the steps of neighbours' houses and bartering for eel heads at the local market. When Joseph and his brother were evacuated from London during World War II, they carried their pyjamas in pillowcases sealed up with tape.

Joseph's father had been a clockmaker, supplying railway stations and the navy, before his business went bust. To add to his woes, McKenzie senior sustained a serious leg injury after falling down some stairs, leaving him incapacitated. It's fair to say that life was pretty grim in the McKenzie household.

In 1944, however, Joseph took a job as a clerk in the East End of London, and after receiving his first pay packet, he rushed out to buy a twin-lens reflex camera. His mother was unimpressed. 'She was so furious he'd spent his money on a camera that she grabbed it and threw it across the room,' says Frank, Joseph's son.

But Joseph didn't need his mother's approval to pursue a career in photography because he had a plan. 'He was reaching the age of conscription, but what he really wanted was to join the Photographic Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) of the RAE,' says Frank. 'He knew there was no way this elite group was going to let some East End ruffian in, so he took elocution lessons.'

In 1947 Joseph's plan paid off and he was accepted by the PRU. Over the next five years, he captured everything from visiting dignitaries to members of the RAF and crash sites. 'Jet engines were relatively new back then, so some things took off and never made it,' says Frank.



It was a job that Joseph excelled at and, for the most part, enjoyed. 'It looks like he had a lot of freedom,' says Frank. 'He seemed to do a lot of periphery work, walking around and photographing towns and cities.' At one point Joseph visited Cologne, where he photographed the city's cathedral set against a backdrop of bombed-out buildings. 'The consequences of the war for Germany were equal to those in London,' adds Frank.

After leaving the RAE, Joseph studied photography at the London College of Printing. 'It was the first course to look at photography from an art perspective,' says Frank. Having served with the PRU, he swiftly rose to the top of his class.

When he left the college two years later, he was approached by St Martin's School of Art and asked to introduce photography to its curriculum. 'It was the first institution of its kind to do this,' explains Frank. 'There was still a lot of resistance from painters, sculptors and other people in the fine arts, so they were pioneers really.'

Joseph's generous, open nature made him a popular tutor at St Martin's, and he often assisted students in departments other than his own. 'There were a lot of young fashion >

Opposite (top) **From Gorbals Children, Glasgow 1964/65**
Opposite (bottom) **From Dunfermline & its People 1967**
Right (top) **From Dunfermline & its People 1967**
Below (left) **Fashion portfolio, St Martin's School of Art**
Below (right) **June Davies, St Martin's School of Art**





◀ designers creating pieces that needed photographing for their portfolios, so my father helped them out,' reveals Frank. 'I've got an incredible collection of his fashion work – some of it is drop-dead gorgeous.'

Throughout the 1950s and 60s Joseph photographed London extensively, but by 1963 he'd developed a sense of unease about raising a family in such a free and easy city. 'At this point he decided to apply for Australia's assisted migration scheme,' remembers his son. His skills were in demand, his application was accepted, then, after one short meeting, everything changed. 'When he mentioned he had a wife and five kids, they told him the scheme was for families of five, not seven.'

As a pragmatist, Joseph shrugged off any disappointment and, instead of boarding a boat to Australia, he took a job at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee. 'Like St Martin's, they were looking for someone to integrate photography into the arts,' explains Frank.

In a twist of fate, the week he accepted this position, he received a phone call from Australia House. 'They said, "Good news, we've got tickets and accommodation for your family,"' says Frank. 'But my father was a principled man and he said, "I've accepted another job, therefore I have to do it".'

So, during the winter of 1964, Frank and his siblings travelled north to join their father in a house he'd secured using a combination of money and charm, and Joseph once more tried to convince the art world that photography could be an ally.

Thanks to his talent, and his connections in London, Joseph again proved popular with the students. 'One of his friends was quite high up in the Royal College of Art, so my father could call them, and they would take on a student based on his recommendation,' explains Frank. 'My father was a man who could open doors and get you where you needed to be.'

Among the students who benefited from this support were Calum Colvin and Albert Watson. Looking at a copy of Watson's book, *Cyclops*, Frank can see traces of his father. 'Albert's subject matter is very different from my father's, but I can see his printing technique in every single picture,' he says.

During the 1960s Joseph produced a number of important studies centred around Dundee. 'He was commissioned to photograph the building of the Tay Road Bridge in 1964,' explains Frank. Around the same time, however, he came across a

Left (top) **From Gorbals Children, Glasgow 1964/65**
Left (bottom) **Belfast 1969, from Hibernian Images**
Opposite (top) **From Dunfermline & its People 1967**
Opposite (bottom) **From Dunfermline & its People 1967**

series of paintings by Joan Eardley featuring children living in the Gorbals, a deprived suburban area of Glasgow. 'My father was moved by the work and immediately decided he had to go and take a look.'

What he found there consumed him for months. 'He made many trips between Dundee and Glasgow, wearing out two cars along the way,' says Frank. In the end, he captured more than 300 images documenting the lives of children living under the shadow of poverty.

In 1967 Joseph became acutely aware of the political and social unrest in Ireland, so he decided to see what was happening for himself. 'He photographed the North and the South,' says Frank. 'On the back of one of the pictures he wrote, "For a boy who experienced the Blitz, this is far worse".'

Joseph's images of Ireland were exhibited at Aberdeen Art Gallery in 1972, but the text he wrote to accompany the show was heavily censored, much to his disgust. 'My father lost the plot,' says Frank. 'He said, "If I can't say what I want to say and show what I want to show, I'm coming to take the entire exhibition down".'

The experience left Joseph wounded. 'He decided that if he couldn't show what he wanted to, he wasn't going to do any more new public exhibitions,' says Frank. 'He withdrew just as photography was breaking into the art market, which was really sad.'

But Joseph had no plans to quit photography entirely. In 1974 he opened a private gallery at his home in Scotland, where he welcomed the likes of curator Mark Haworth-Booth (after he'd chastised him for being late). The enterprise lasted for six years, after which time Joseph and his wife decided to call it a day.

A few years later, Frank took a train up to Scotland, hoping to convince his father to share his work publicly again. 'I told him he had this incredible talent, and it was wrong that his pictures weren't being seen,' he says. Frank knew his father didn't want to deal with any of the logistics, so he offered to take them on for him. 'I thought there's no way on earth he's going to agree to this,' says Frank, 'but then he did.'

Frank has been championing his father's work for more than 40 years now, and his commitment shows no sign of abating. When Joseph died in 2015, he left more than 40,000 prints and 100,000 negatives in his son's care. 'I can't do it all,' says Frank, laughing. 'But I want to get as much exposure for my father's work as I can. It needs to be talked about, and it needs to be explored.'

Frank is opening a gallery dedicated to Joseph McKenzie's work in October.
josephmckenzie.com

