

deForest “Shorty” Wheeler Trimingham

Profile by Meredith Ebbin

Nationality: Bermudian

Date of Birth: December 23, 1919

Education: Saltus Grammar School, Avon Old Farms, Avon, Connecticut; University of Virginia (did not complete a degree).

Occupation: Retired retailer; UBP MP from 1958-1980; Minister of Tourism from 1972 to 1977.

Wife: Dorothy Trimingham, born King

Children: Pamela Dunbar Trimingham, by previous marriage

Grandchildren: Stephen Van Dyck, Peter Van Dyck and Thomas Van Dyck

At age 84, deForest Trimingham is justifiably proud of what his post-retirement jaunts to Asia have produced: spectacular images of National Geographic quality, and a book of photographs *Buddha: The Living Way*, published in 1998 by Random House, with a foreword by the Dalai Lama and text by travel writer Pico Iyer.

His work is all the more impressive for a man who allowed his talent, first discovered by a boarding school teacher, to lapse for more than four decades.

Trimingham made his first trips to Asia after family store Trimingham’s opened a buying office outside Hong Kong. “I was totally enchanted with the different cultures,” he recalled. “Bangkok was very Buddhist, and Japan, which is Shinto and Buddhist, and Hong Kong, which is probably the most cosmopolitan city in the world. I became intrigued with everything.”

Retirement left him with lots of time to travel. The business trips to Asia whetted a desire to see more countries in the region and gave him a reason to take his camera along.

“When I started to travel, this gave me a double reason for taking it up again, because I went to great exotic places and saw some great and exotic things that were really fun to try and turn into interesting photography,” he said. He has since visited every country in Asia, with the exception of Mongolia, and has also photographed the forbidding landscapes of Antarctica. Foreign locales have always been the inspiration for his work.

Trimingham’s earliest introduction to photography came when he was a student at Avon Old Farms School in Connecticut. The U.S. culture and

curriculum, which was markedly different from the British educational system in use at Saltus Grammar School, took some getting used to.

He said: “I was about 14 or 15. I had never seen snow. I didn’t know anything about the social values of my schoolmates. I didn’t know American sports, American history...

“I had an interesting time adjusting, to the sports, the academic life and the social life, but I learned a lot.”

Paul Cushing Child, who later married the famous American cook Julia Child, taught art. “Paul Cushing Child was one of those teachers who comes along every now and again who is truly gifted,” Trimmingham recalled. “He said: ‘You don’t seem to be very interested in drawing or anything like that. I happen to be very keen on photography and I will let you take this freshman art course on photography, rather than what the rest of the class is doing, because I have all the cameras, the equipment, the dark room, the works. But I’ve got to have a promise from you that you will not use the camera as something to copy whatever is in front of it.

“‘You have to remember that an artist is faced with a blank piece of paper and his job is to convey on that piece of paper what he wants to convey. It might be all kinds of things. It may not be what’s in front of him at all. It may be his emotional reaction to what’s in front of him ... You don’t take a picture, you make a picture. So he started me off on a course of abstract photography.’”

Cushing was not impressed by “pretty pictures” and he encouraged his student to look for such elements as “repetition and shape, rhythm, texture, light and shade.”

Cushing would tell him: “I want you to go out and photograph these different elements, until you get so used to seeing them that you automatically look for them when you’re using your camera.”

And he urged him to apply the same formula to other art forms.

He would say: “You’re taking music appreciation. Don’t you see the rhythm, the texture, the repetition of shape, light and shade? Don’t you see that in your music? You’re taking senior English, Shakespeare. Don’t you see it in the writing? It’s right there — short sentences, long sentences, choppy sentences, smooth sentences. All these things are there.

“I think it’s one of the greatest gifts that you can get in education. It made me appreciate music, art, and literature a great deal more because of the simple truths he taught me.

“Now this is quite different from the way most people who go to a photographic school are taught. They learn how to use the camera, but they don’t learn much about art. When I talk about this to photographers, they

say: ‘That’s a lot of baloney.’ It’s a bit of a hobbyhorse with me, but I think that’s one of the things that makes my photography a little bit different, particularly from photojournalists’. I have nothing against photojournalists, but it’s a different approach.”

He continued: “If I were to photograph someone being hanged, somebody would set up a tripod, put the camera in, set the exposure and just at the right moment, you press a button. Have I done anything, except press a button? I haven’t created that.

“But if I can put an arrangement on a piece of photographic paper that makes you think: Gosh, that’s frightening, or that’s exciting, or that’s happiness, or whatever it may be, then I’ve done something. I’ve created something, I haven’t just copied someone.”

The lessons were invaluable, but they were eventually pushed to the sideline. Trimingham went on to the University of Virginia, but the Second World War brought his studies to an end.

“I came back after the war, I went into Trimingham Brothers, then I got married, I had a child, got involved with life. Photography wasn’t a profession for me. I just forgot it really. I had a camera, but I didn’t do much about it.”

Eventually, he became a director and vice-president of Trimingham’s as well as a politician. He was first elected to Parliament in 1958, continuing in Government after 1968, the year the first election under universal adult suffrage and the two-party system was held. He was Tourism Minister from 1972 to 1977 and remained in Parliament until 1980, the same year he quit the family business. Throughout his business and political life, he continued with the sport he had excelled at since boyhood — sailing.

deForest Wheeler Trimingham was born on December 23, 1919 to one of Bermuda’s oldest and most established merchant families, whose members dominated business and political life up to the 1960s. deForest, the son of Kenneth Trimingham, is descended from a long line of sailors — an ancestor owned a fleet of sailing vessels that traded with the West Indies — and he racked up a string of sailing successes. He won sailing trophies in Europe, Canada and the U.S. One sportswriter once called him the “damnedest dinghy man in the world.” Trimingham proved the accuracy of those remarks in Weymouth, England in 1953 when he skippered his 14-foot *Barilea* to become the first non-Englishman to win the Prince of Wales contest.

Cousin and former sailing partner, Eldon, who is six foot five to “Shorty” Trimingham’s five foot seven, once said: “He knows what he’s

doing. You have a terrific feeling of confidence in sailing with a man as keen and as sensitive to a boat as Shorty is.”

From 1952 to 1954, Trimingham was commodore of the Royal Bermuda Yacht Club, which was established in 1844, the same year James Harvey Trimingham started the family store. Although he worked at Trimingham’s for 35 years, virtually all his working life, he walked away from the firm in 1980, because of disagreements with the board over the way it was run, he said in a Royal Gazette story about the family rift. A vice-president and merchandising director when he quit Trimingham’s, he said he has no ties to the firm.

Trimingham considers himself a travel photographer. He took several one-week photography courses in the U.S., given by National Geographic photographers, which he found “extremely helpful”. His excursions to Asia, made with wife Dorothy, were short trips, about three weeks each year, and the couple did not stay in one location. Had he been a professional photographer, he would have remained in one place for a couple of weeks, waiting for the right conditions. “This limited me a little bit,” he said, adding that three weeks were sufficient for his needs. Trimingham has photographed Bermuda scenes, but he is not particularly inspired by the familiar.

He said: “You’re not as excited about what you’ve seen all your life as you are by something that’s a little different. Because Bermuda’s so pretty, you tend to photograph pretty pictures, which are very nice. Some people say that the merit in my photographs is the fact that I have travelled so much and I think there is some truth in this, but I do think the background that I had, that I got in school, did make my pictures slightly different.”

Many of Trimingham’s photographs, including some taken in Bermuda, hang on the walls of his home at Woodstock Cove, Paget. While he has exhibited in Bermuda and photographs used in *Buddha: The Living Way* were shown at the Asia Society in New York for the book, he shoots primarily for his own pleasure.

He said: “I don’t sell any of my pictures. I’ve never sold a picture. I’ve given a couple away. Once you begin selling pictures, then you tend to take pictures that you think will sell.

“I have a closet full of them. I change them from time to time. I take nothing but slides. I don’t take prints. What the hell would you do with all those pictures? I file the slides away and I can go back and pick one out anytime I like.”

Still, the 200 photographs in *Buddha: The Living Way*, a book which is now out of print, are a tangible record of his work. His photographs of

Buddhist centres throughout Asia took him remote regions and to such places as Bhutan, Burma, Tibet, Japan and Java. The book, which included photographs of U.S. centres, opened with images of vast landscapes and “spires piercing clouds”, one reviewer said, before continuing with shots of temple interiors, Buddhist sculptures and paintings, musical instruments, and finally, practitioners.

Trimingham, who is not Buddhist, told the Mid-Ocean News the year it was published: “It was conceived to read like a Buddhist scroll, seamless and continuous. Each photo has a story of its own to tell, but viewed in sequence, they offer a glimpse of the essence of Buddhism, where there is om, the universal hum of all and nothing.

“The most interesting and unique aspect of the book is the way one picture relates on the left to the one on the right. There is a flow like a Chinese scroll, not only in the content, but also in the colouring. Two pages are predominantly blue, some yellow. It’s a journey to go through this picture book, whereas in most picture books, each image stands on its own.”

Trimingham says he shoots in colour, although he would “do black and white by choice every time” if he had an adequate dark room and took enough pictures to warrant all the equipment that’s required.

“I think black and white photography is more sensitive than colour for certain types of photography,” he said. “Because Bermuda climate is not conducive to dark rooms, I’ve stuck with colour.”

Asked about his favourite photographers, Trimingham has a high regard for Japanese photographers, who he said are “wonderful, just magnificent.”

He hasn’t picked up a camera for 18 months, ever since a “very unusual” stroke damaged his optic nerve, affecting half his vision. He spends much of his time sorting through the hundreds of photographs he’s taken over the last 20 years, which are filed by country, to determine which would be “fun to print.” He gave up his other favourite pastime, sailing, a couple of years ago. “I swallowed the anchor,” he joked.

Asked what he wants people to get from his show at the National Gallery, he said: “I would like to think they get from looking at my work, there’s more to it than postcards. There is some real attempt to have a photograph produce in small measure what good paintings can do.” Yet he believes the art of the photographer is not in the same realm as the art of the painter.

“If you look at a pretty picture, of a particular scene, as opposed to a good painting of the same scene, there’s one hell of a difference. For a photographer to think that he’s an artist, no way. I think photographers have

to recognise the fact that photography is not really an art in the same way painting is. It's a good creative attempt, and it succeeds, but it's limited by the fact that it is a machine that is producing what goes on the paper, whereas the painter starts from that blank piece of paper and he made that painting. He didn't press a button and have it suddenly reproduced for him in every detail."

He does concede, however "that's an argument as old as the hills."

Freelance writer Meredith Ebbin is a former editor of The Bermudian magazine.

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