

GRIFFITHS, PHILIP JONES (1936-2008), photographer

Name: Philip Jones Griffiths

Date of birth: 1936

Date of death: 2008

Partner: Heather Holden

Partner: Donna Webb (née Ferrato)

Child: Katherine Holden

Child: Fenella Ferrato

Parent: Catherine Griffiths (née Jones)

Parent: Joseph Griffiths

Gender: Male

Occupation: photographer

Area of activity: Art and Architecture; Printing and Publishing

Author: William Troughton

Philip Jones Griffiths was born in Rhuddlan on 18 February 1936. His father Joseph Griffiths (1903-1962) managed the local London Midland & Scottish Railways Freight Service, and his mother Catherine, (1905?-1973) from whom the 'Jones' was acquired, was a midwife. He had two younger brothers, Penri Jones Griffiths (born 1938) and Gareth Jones Griffiths (born 1944). Philip was educated at St Asaph Grammar School, went to Tabernacl Methodist chapel three times every Sunday and took up photography at the age of fourteen. His first photograph, taken on a box brownie, was of a friend in a rowing boat off Holyhead. Aged sixteen he discovered the joys of *Picture Post* and joined Rhyl Camera Club. Before leaving school he had gained sufficient proficiency to photograph weddings and work as a photographer at the nearby Golden Sands Holiday Camp. On leaving school he became an apprentice pharmacist at Boots the Chemist in Rhyl. One advantage of the job was the ability to borrow cameras for the weekend. It was his contention that between the ages of sixteen and eighteen he learned to take pictures; 'I got all that beautiful landscape stuff out of the way in North Wales and was ready for the rest of the world.'

Initially 'the rest of the world' was confined to Liverpool University, where he studied pharmacy, and Piccadilly, where in 1959 he worked as a pharmacist for Boots the Chemist. In London he combined night shifts as a pharmacist with freelance photographic assignments for *The Sunday Times*, *Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers until becoming a full-time photographer for the latter in 1961. Many photographs from this period appear in his posthumous volume *Recollections*.

Growing up in a Welsh town dominated by an English castle had instilled in him a social conscience and sympathy for the underdog. In turn, this gave rise to his early British work being described as 'a Welshman's offbeat critique of any manifestation of power.' The trait was to persist.

His first big breakthrough came in Algeria in 1962. As the war for independence drew to a close there were persistent rumours of remote regroupment camps used to confine civilians whilst the surrounding countryside was napalmed. However, no photographs of these camps had yet emerged. Using his contacts and after trekking some distance he was able to enter and photograph one such camp. His photographs were subsequently published in a double page spread in *The Observer*. Assignments in Alaska, Russia and throughout Europe soon followed. By 1966 the lure of constant international travel was waning and Griffiths felt the need for something to get passionate about. With 180,000 American military personnel now in Vietnam, it wasn't difficult to determine that there was something very important happening there.

Now an Associate member of Magnum Photo Agency, thanks to the help of Ian Berry, Griffiths arrived in Vietnam in 1966. He travelled the country developing a respect for a people whose manner reminded him of rural Wales. His travels disproved official reports to reveal a military-industrial complex at work desecrating both culture and landscape. Choosing Leica and Nikon F cameras loaded with black and white film he photographed the effect on the ordinary Vietnamese and to a lesser extent, combatants. Shooting in black and white meant he frequently lost out on publication to his contemporaries who used colour film. He later changed to colour transparency film for commercial reasons.

Selling his images was never easy. A chance encounter at Angkor Wat with Jackie Kennedy and **Lord Harlech** (between whom there were rumours of romance) resulted in a paparazzi style scoop for Griffiths and a financial lifeline that sustained his work in Vietnam.

Although his photography is likened to contemporaries Don McCullin, Tim Page and Larry Burrows, Griffiths was the only one to question the morality of the war. He wanted to be the one who would show what was really going on in Vietnam. Here was something of profound importance to the whole world and it became his goal to present every aspect of the war in a digestible way between two covers of a book. Containing more than 260 images the result was *Vietnam Inc*, a scathing indictment of American involvement in south-east Asia. The book used powerful black and white imagery alongside Griffiths' acerbic debunking of military terminology. Griffiths' sensitivity to the plight of the ordinary Vietnamese is illustrated in the way he allows the subjects to retain their dignity despite their suffering. The book was well received and fed into the increasing anti-war sentiment in the United States. Reviews were positive: *Time Magazine* called it 'the best work of photo-reportage of war ever published' and according to the *New York Times* this was 'the closest we are ever going to come to a definitive photo-journalistic essay on the war.'

Whilst the horror of the Vietnam War spread to neighbouring countries and drew towards a conclusion, conflict of a different kind was fermenting far closer to home. Philip Jones Griffiths had witnessed a peaceful Northern Ireland in 1965 when documenting Orange Order parades but could foresee the coming discord. By 1972, Northern Ireland was witnessing incidents of sectarian violence on a regular basis, exacerbated by the Bloody Sunday killings of 30 January. His images from 1972 and 1973 show the incongruities of the conflict as they mix urban warfare with mundane daily life. Though illustrating combatants they suggest an insidious conflict conducted away from the camera, a complete contrast to Vietnam.

In early 1973 his eye for cultural collisions led him to document the first 'Adventure Club' package holiday to Papua New Guinea in the Pacific Ocean. Joining a solicitor, Catholic priest, a former Yorkshire Ladies golf champion and assorted others, the trip consisted of a three week trek through the wilds of one of the world's least explored and most biologically diverse countries. The exoticism worked both ways as his pictures document not just the primitive tribes but also their curiosity towards the westerners in their midst. The pictures featured in *The Sunday Times Magazine* and subsequently numerous European publications. He undertook another trip to the region shortly afterwards and concentrated on photographing the native tribespeople and their ceremonies. Again his photographs were reproduced in *The Sunday Times Magazine*. Whilst colour film did justice to the vibrant colours of the tropics and translated well into the numerous colour supplements, for exhibition purposes he chose to print his preferred images in black and white.

Philip Jones Griffiths famously said 'Once the camera is loaded with colour film the problems begin.' Despite his often stated preference for black and white, most of his work was shot on colour film. His preference was for Kodachrome or Ektachrome, neither too old nor too new. Ever a perfectionist he developed a method of 'incubating' his film stock to obtain the desired colour balance. Following the publication of *Vietnam Inc* his versatility as a photographer became evident as did his continued interest in giving a voice to the underdog. He first toured the Pacific and went on to photograph conflicts, human interest stories and commercial projects. Fascinated by Vietnam he visited a further twenty-five times and also photographed extensively in Cambodia and Thailand. He also served as President of the Magnum Photo Agency from 1980 to 1985.

Apart from commissions he didn't publish another book until *Dark Odyssey* was released to coincide with a retrospective exhibition at Amgueddfa Cymru - The National Museum of Wales. Covering five decades and published a quarter of a century after *Vietnam Inc*, it included images from the Vietnam War through to Operation Desert Storm in 1991. *Agent Orange - Collateral Damage in Viet Nam*, published in 2003, was similar in style to *Vietnam Inc* in that it was a no holds barred portrayal, this time of birth defects caused by the use of the dioxin Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. Completing his trilogy of books on Vietnam, *Viet Nam at Peace* charts the development of a post-war internationally isolated Vietnam to a prosperous, modern country with one of the highest growth rates in the world. The book is regarded by some critics as the completion of *Vietnam Inc*.

Philip Jones Griffiths died at his home in Shepherd's Bush, London, on 19 March 2008, having been aware since 2001 that he had terminal cancer. He was survived by his two daughters Fenella Ferrato (daughter of Donna Ferrato, born 1982) and Katherine Holden (daughter of Heather Holden, born 1982). It was his wish that his collection be housed in Wales and that the Philip Jones Griffiths Foundation be established in order to preserve his archive and to provide education to the public in the art and science of photography, promoting lectures and exhibitions and research opportunities, and providing financial assistance, equipment or books to persons under 25 to assist them to become photographers. His archive currently resides in the National Library of Wales where a major exhibition of his work was held in 2015.

Author

William Troughton

Sources

'The Vietnamization of Philip Jones Griffiths' - Popular Photography website, December 2008
Anthony Brockway, An Interview with Philip Jones Griffiths, Foto8.com website
Graham Harrison, interview with Philip Jones Griffiths, Photohistories.com website
Amateur Photographer, 10 September 2005

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: Philip Jones Griffiths

Sound and Film

NLW: Philip Jones Griffiths: A Welsh Focus on War and Peace

Additional Links

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