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Martha Langford and John Langford, *A Cold War Tourist and His Camera,* McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011, 196 p

Peter White

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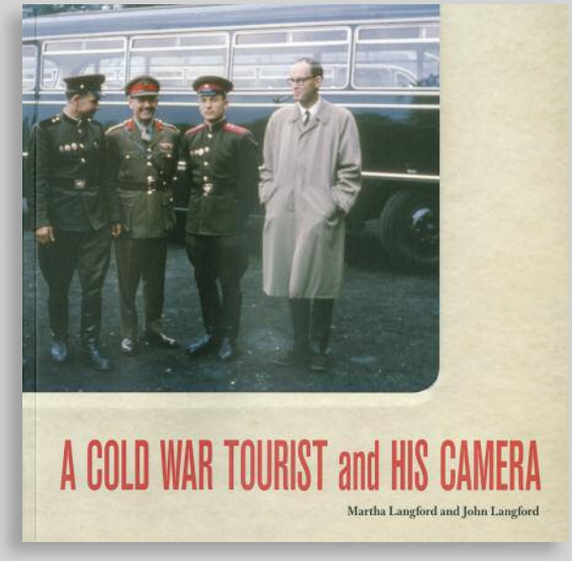
Martha Langford and John Langford

A Cold War Tourist and His Camera
McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011, 196 p



On the one hand, there are the snaps by career civil servant Warren Langford who, in 1963, unaccountably found himself part of domestic and overseas military-civilian familiarization tours of Cold War hot spots.[1] On the other hand, there are his daughter Martha, an authority in the scholarly study of vernacular photography, and son John, a political scientist whose expertise includes public sector ethics. Put these together and you have the makings of a photographic study that stretches the genre to its limits, if not beyond. The authors describe their examination as interdisciplinary, but, with its many overlapping and intersecting strands – not least its intergenerational family dynamic – "interdisciplinary" hardly begins to describe the complexity of this rich, fascinating book and the disturbing realities on which it sheds light.

As children, the authors viewed these images in slide shows that their father probably took more pleasure in organizing than they did in watching. *A Cold War Tourist and His Camera* is their analysis of what now are clearly notable pictures in view of contemporary political and cultural context and theory. The book is also a reflection on the question of the innocence of amateur photography, a point on which it is especially valuable, and on how innocence itself can be exploited by politics and fear.

Among the many fascinating insights of the book is the recognition that while some spots may have been hotter than others, there were few, if any, places in the world that were outside the ambit of Cold War confrontation. As part of its tour, Langford's group visited the Canadian North, Colorado Springs, and Berlin, each recognizable as a strategic site. But it also travelled to Morocco, Nigeria, Kenya, Egypt (at the time part of the United Arab Republic), and other parts of Africa; San Diego; Portugal; and Italy, including both Rome and Venice. One is struck, for instance, by the fact that Langford's aerial shots of the Grand Canal and Lido were taken not from a commercial airliner but from the same kind of military helicopter that became iconic for its use by American forces in Vietnam a few years later. One of the key points that the authors raise here is the distinction between their father's official role and his personal interests and curiosity as a tourist and the confusion between these dispositions when he had his camera in hand, a public–private split that extended to similar dichotomies between labour and leisure and between surveillance and observation. Seemingly straightforward photograhs like these are both revealing and chilling reminders of the degree to which this perilous stand-off was waged not only through the threat of Armageddon but by stealth, in the form of the normalization of that threat as a condition of the everyday world.

Langford's African shots involve a similar logic. Taken while sightseeing, they concentrate primarily on well-known local sites and daily life. On one level, they seem to be clear-cut products of what has been termed "imperial eyes" and, as such, are subject to by-now-familiar postcolonial critique.[2] As the authors note, the slick and calculated images in picture magazines such as *Life* and the less obvious, more ideologically subtle photo layouts of *National Geographic* were a form of "cultural memory" that served as not only visual but ideological templates for amateur photographers. The authors argue, however, that the technical limitations of the amateur could at the same time open a crack in the stereotypes of these polished, professional photographs, offering a personal sense of the texture of time and place. This is a point that perhaps could be taken a bit further. From the perspective of almost sixty years, the extent to which African nations were fettered, and far worse, by their roles as pawns in this larger power game is only too well understood. Where, then, does the line get drawn between public and private – or can it be?

Langford had no particular interest in photography prior to these trips, for which he purchased a camera. He returned with about 200 colour slides. These were shot for personal use and also included a number taken by colleagues. Slide photography enjoyed great popularity at the time, in part because of the distinctively vivid, attractive quality of colour produced by contemporary film stocks, notably Kodachrome. Primarily of interest to consumers, slides were most commonly presented as slide shows. Their colour, together with the conditions of their presentation – in darkened rooms for audiences of family and friends – made them compelling vehicles of the values that they embodied. Today, this colour is like a patina or language that inevitably carries associations with that era. Easily dismissed for its nostalgic appeal, when considered in the context of the particular ideological underpinnings of Langford's slides, however, this colour is a nostalgia that stings.

In an important study, Elaine Tyler May has argued that the policy of "containment" of communism that was the basis of American – and Canadian – Cold War foreign policy was paralleled by a domestic politics of containment. Defining and reinforcing the norm of the nuclear family, it served both the maintenance of capitalism and social survival in the Cold War struggle.[3] In their introduction, the authors allude to this link, describing the amateur slide show as "a set of images teetering between the nuclear family and nuclear annihilation." It's not, however, a line of inquiry that they pursue. Given the focus of their study, this is entirely understandable. It is also reasonable in terms of the objectivity and critical distance called for by academic inquiry. Yet at the same time, the question arises whether the domestic concerns associated with the Cold War has had an effect on their work.

Warren Langford is described by his children as a man of his times. Not incidentally, with his pipe, beige raincoat, white shirt, and narrow tie, he bore an uncanny resemblance to M. Hulot, filmmaker Jacques Tati's contemporary personification of modernity. However, unlike M. Hulot, who is constantly flustered by conditions of the modern world, Langford appears to coolly take them in his stride. If not a hawk, he was largely supportive of the policy of containment. The authors describe how, for example, he seems to have been moved, like so many, by "The Family of Man," the Museum of Modern Art photography exhibition and publication that sought to demonstrate the commonalities that bind people around the world, now including the spectre of nuclear catastrophe. As both scholars and Langford's children, the authors' own situation in some ways parallels the oppositions that structured their father's experience. The question raised is not a criticism of the book, though it is an acknowledgment of the trade-offs inherent in interdisciplinary work. In this case, the reader is left wondering whether and to what extent the authors' important work has been shaped by the larger social dynamics that circumscribe their study and the terms of reference that they have therefore set for it.

Finally, the authors describe these slides as a modest body of photographs. Perhaps. But both their father and the colleagues who took pictures of him were highly intelligent men who produced many remarkably fine and sensitive photographs. Langford's shots of Berlin may be similar to the multitude of images that have made clichés of Cold War images of the divided city, for example, but they have a particular combination of warmth and stark clarity, as well as an eye for detail, that have a power to defamiliarize the familiar. And then there are the striking photos taken of the civilian Langford in his raincoat mingling and posing with visiting uniformed Soviet officers in East Berlin. Images such as these are not only not clichés, they are brilliant emblems of a world at war with itself.

1 The tours were a part of the National Defence College's curriculum of Cold War training. NDC was a national security training centre located in Kingston whose teaching philosophy, as cited by Langford and Langford (pp. 4–5), was based on "a recognition of the need for greater common understanding between senior officers of the armed forces and between senior military officers and civilian officials." 2 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). 3 Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

Peter White *is an independent curator and writer who lives in Montreal. He is co-editor of* Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary Art *and recently organized "Jeremy Borsos: 8 mm Redux" and "Judging Books by Their Covers" for SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art.*