

The Telegraph

Photographer Elliott Erwitt in search of the real Scotland



Veteran American photographer Elliott Erwitt's assignments have been many and varied. How would he capture Scotland on behalf of a whisky company?

By Ellie Pithers
01 Nov 2013

Elliott Erwitt prides himself on taking pictures of things that are real. He loathes Photoshop, and he thinks the best thing about photography is that 'it's about what you see, not what you construct'. But for his latest project, a photographic study of Scotland, he made an exception: he took a picture of the Loch Ness monster. 'It's a real photograph – your basic monster,' Erwitt, 85, insists. 'It's not digital manipulation.' But isn't he capturing something that isn't there? 'No. It's the real Loch Ness. And magic, of course.'

Concise snaps with a bit of magic thrown in are Erwitt's calling card. He was born in Paris in 1928, the son of Jewish-Russian parents, and moved to America at the age of 10. He started out as a photographer's assistant in the 1950s in the US Army, before joining the Magnum Photos agency in 1953. He records the humdrum and the seminal: his photographs of Jackie Kennedy bewildered with grief at her husband's funeral in 1963, or Richard Nixon jabbing the puffed chest of Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, are as famous as his shot of a newly married couple sitting on the bumper of a car with a sign that reads, she got me this morning but i'll get her tonight.

Erwitt's forthcoming book, Elliott Erwitt's Great Scottish Adventure, was shot in collaboration with The Macallan whisky as part of its Masters of Photography series. Armed with a Leica, Erwitt meandered around Scotland, taking photographs as and when he saw fit. Of the 158 images that appear in the book, 58 of Erwitt's favourites will each be paired with a single cask of malt whisky and sold in limited editions of 35 per pairing.

Erwitt admits he sampled multiple whiskies but is adamant that alcohol did not cloud the brief. 'It was one of those dream assignments where you just go some place and do whatever strikes you.' He spent a total of 33 days in Scotland, on three trips: nine days in Glasgow and Edinburgh in June 2011, a week in Inverness in August of that year for the Glorious Twelfth (the beginning of the grouse-shooting season), and two and a half weeks on the islands in September 2012. The itinerary (and subsequent driving) was executed by Stuart Smith, a designer who has worked with Erwitt on the layouts of his books for 14 years. Erwitt happily ceded control. 'I'm just the photographer; I just get pointed and I take the picture,' he says. He is ill at ease when it comes to discussing his working methods and their yield, and questions about individual images are met with a blunt response. 'It's a nice picture. I don't know what there is to say about it.'

Erwitt had some notion of the stereotypical Scottish scenes he wanted to capture before he embarked on the trip, but catching people unawares was his main concern. 'Elliott's remit is always people,' Smith says. 'We knew we wanted the cannon at Edinburgh Castle, for example, so we went and waited for something to happen – and eventually got the shot of a woman peering in.' Other boxes to tick included tartan trousers, a man in a kilt (ideally alongside a woman in trousers), a telephone box in the middle of nowhere, bagpipes and Scottish dogs.

Dogs are an obsession for Erwitt. He has published several photographic books on the subject, including *Son of Bitch* (1974), *Elliott Erwitt: To the Dogs* (1992), *Dog Dogs* (1998), *Woof* (2005) and *Elliott Erwitt's Dogs* (2008). Scotland afforded a host of breeds, and Erwitt snapped all 12 of them for the book. 'I had a Cairn terrier who went to heaven about eight months ago. I am still in mourning,' he says. Why does he love dogs so much? 'What's not to like?' he retorts.

Lest Erwitt be accused of flippant canine condescension, he also took pictures of foreboding landscapes and grittier urban scenes. Pictures from Glasgow's Barras market depict a rough, tough Scottish spirit – 'it was seedy,' Erwitt recalls – while photographs of farmers herding sheep in the Isle of Skye suggest a bleaker, more isolated existence. He shot the book on film, in black and white. This, he says, allowed him greater control over the finished product. 'Everything I do in film comes out of my darkroom, under my supervision. And that's what I've been doing for the last 56 years, so I'm quite familiar with it.'

What does he hope his book will say about Scottish culture? 'I hope it shows a fairly ordinary picture of Scotland, without being sensational, without being dramatic.' Hard-pressed to name his favourite photograph in the book, Erwitt chooses instead to praise the locals. 'The people were wonderful,' he says. 'If I could only understand what they were saying, it would have been even better.'