



**WHAT HAPPENED HERE:  
A PHOTOGRAPHER IN  
SARAJEVO 1992-1996  
VAL WILLIAMS**

Photojournalist Paul Lowe was one of the many international correspondents who covered the conflicts in the Balkans in the 1990s. With its 'Yugoslavian' identity beginning to dissolve after the death of Tito in 1980, the federal governmental system, set up as the post-World War 2 Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia began to fracture, leading to violent ethnic cleansing, multiple war crimes and enormous civilian deaths and injuries.

In his 2005 monograph, *Bosnians*, Paul Lowe made a comprehensive study of the war in Bosnia, exploring the physicality of a nation under extreme duress – the battered streets, the dispossessed, the evidence of mass graves, the signs of struggle and fatigue, the steps towards repair and renewal, as the conflict came to an end.

His photographs of the Siege of Sarajevo are a study of a sedate and sophisticated European city which, for four bewildering and violent years, was cast adrift, isolated and under siege. In his recent monograph *The Siege of Sarajevo*, Lowe illustrates the hardships and dangers of life under siege – people run for their lives along Sniper Alley, or queue patiently for water. They forage for wild greens in the vacant land around apartment blocks, they are caught in mortar blasts, are injured, hospitalised, killed and mourn their dead. But they also play music, swim in the river, study, hold beauty competitions, work in offices. Children play in the streets.

During his time in Sarajevo, Paul Lowe made a series of panoramic photographs, which were in direct contrast to the photojournalism which formed the main locus of his Bosnian work. While much of Lowe's Bosnian photojournalism sits firmly in the tradition of modern photo documentary – speedy, topical and revealing – the panoramas are a gesture towards photography's history, to the great cityscapes made in the 19th century, in which the sophistication of urban engineering and architecture was mapped and celebrated. Lowe's panoramas are a reverse of these 19th century creations – architecture ruined, urbanity collapsed – they are a comment on the very fragility of sophisticated society. These powerful ruin studies have majesty, solemnity and irony – the ruin liberates us from histories and from knowledge and becomes an arena for the imagination. They document lacunae, spaces between the past and the future, tendentious and mysterious.

Equally as interesting as these panoramas, are a series of medium format photographs made by Lowe in and around Sarajevo during the siege. Carefully composed and full of detail, they are reminiscent of Cecil Beaton's studies of post-Blitz London and are a calm and curious observation of texture, objects, landscapes, the crazy juxtapositions of conflict – the sculptural forms of shattered metal, the almost comically upended car, a flayed curtain creating a monumental stage set. War, the photographs observe, makes nonsense out of everything, creates a theatre of the absurd and the macabre. The series creates a liminal space where we carefully observe the just beyond.

From his position as an observer of the Bosnian wars as a whole, and the Siege of Sarajevo in particular, Paul Lowe has employed a whole range of photographic approaches which set his work aside from what we would commonly think of as 'conflict photojournalism'. 'From the action photograph to the still life, through to panoramas and still-life cityscapes, – he has delved into photograph's vocabularies and used its various languages to investigate and to reveal not only the substance and appearance of siege and conflict, but also the multiple methodologies of photography itself.

Most of us know the conflicts of the 20th century through photography. We are familiar with the idea of the war photographer and images of conflict. We know that war photographs tingle with danger and upend notions of composition and meanings in favour of energy and pace. We are familiar also with the idea that the war zone is a place that photographers move on from, impelled by the demands of news gathering to seek ever more topical conflicts. Paul Lowe's Bosnian photographs, fuelled by his own growing commitment to a place and its people, as well as to the medium of photography, go much deeper than this. This Bosnian archive, begun almost twenty-five years ago, is a vitally important document. It places the photographer within a precise location, asks questions about how photography can be used to explore and to document place, time and event, and about the boundaries and capabilities of the medium. Photography asks 'What happened here?' and we are left looking for the answers.