

# The Essential Guide To Monochrome Photography

Written by Nina Bailey

## Especially for Canon EOS cameras



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## Foreword by the author

I have always loved monochrome photography. I am referring to it as monochrome as there are more options available than just producing that is pure black and white. We can add tints to the images that we shoot and so can produce images with a sepia tint which match the times of bygone years, or add different colours that can bring the images right up to date. This was possible a long time before digital cameras were on the market, but was done with special chemicals that bleached and then replaced parts of the image with other colours.

Some of the most enigmatic images, that have ever been taken, are in monochrome. Despite colour photography being available to the masses, for over 50 years, monochrome is still with us and gaining in popularity again. Names like Ansell Adams, Cartier Bresson, David Bailey all conjure up images, which many years after they were taken, are still regarded as stunning.

Interestingly enough few photographers wish that they were in colour. Monochrome conveys more than just the reality of colour photography, it's much more about emotions and interpretation. Modern day reportage photography is still mainly shot in monochrome, possibly as without the distraction of colour, it allows you to see the real truth behind the image.

Digital photography has enabled a new interest, in monochrome photography to be born. The ability to shoot in camera, or to post produce monochrome images, enables anyone to have a go with this fascinating medium.

In this ebook I have looked at the options available for shooting monochrome in camera or producing the images at the post production stage which is easily achieved with either JPEG or RAW images. I will be looking at using either the camera's supplied free software, Canon's own Digital Photo Professional or Photoshop Elements to perform the post production conversions.

Monochrome shooting will also teach you to understand a lot about the camera's metering systems as you start to see more graphically the subjects or parts of them that will cause the problems.

Nina





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## Chapter 01

# What makes monochrome different



## What makes monochrome different

Monochrome photography makes the photographer go back to the basics of lighting, texture and subject. No longer can we use colour to help give interest to the photograph, or use colour to convey the mood of the scene. The tones and lighting have to do that instead.

Colour can sometimes get in the way of the image. When we look at older photographs, which are either monochrome or sepia, they always give the impression of a world detached from our own. Somehow, the snapshots of yesterday look more interesting than the ones we take today.

In reality they are the same, but often have more ridged posing, less natural surroundings and a formality that our images do not have today. However somehow the lack of colour makes them even more appealing.

For many years, it has been the norm to teach photography with monochrome images first and then move onto colour once the basics are learnt.

It's actually not such a bad thing, as a photographer who can take stunning monochrome images will also have excellent compositional and metering skills to also produce stunning colour images.

It is much easier to learn about the principals of metering when shooting in monochrome, as you can easily see the tonal ranges within the image, thanks to the lack of colour which can be very distracting to the eye.



## How monochrome capture varies from colour

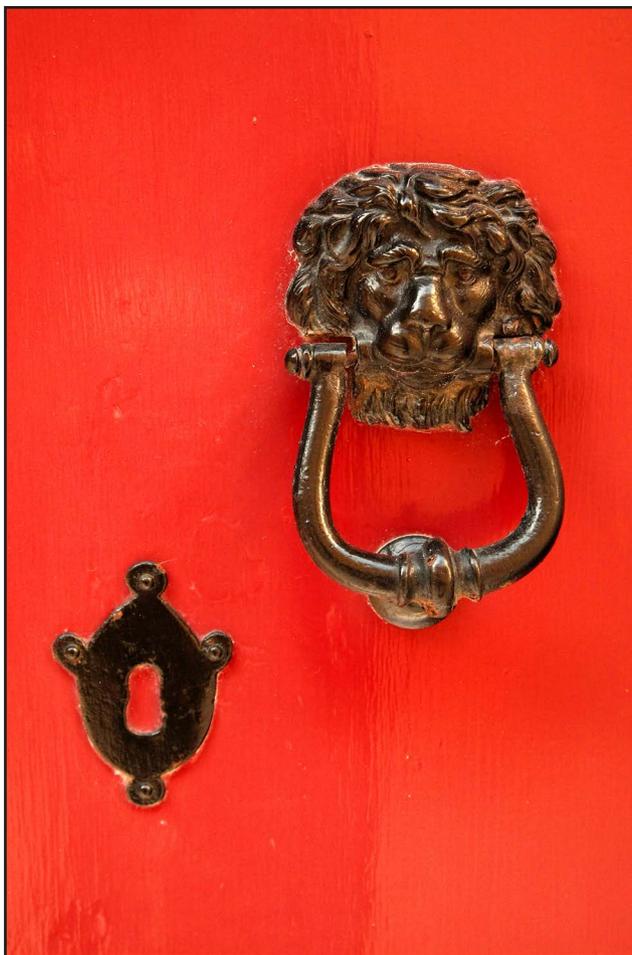
Colour film was designed to capture all the colours shown roughly equally, reproducing a fairly neutral tone image. As time progressed the range of options on saturation and colour tones on film increased dramatically.

The colours can be used to give drama and punch to the image, although they can be altered by use of filters. What you saw through the viewfinder is what you usually got on the film.

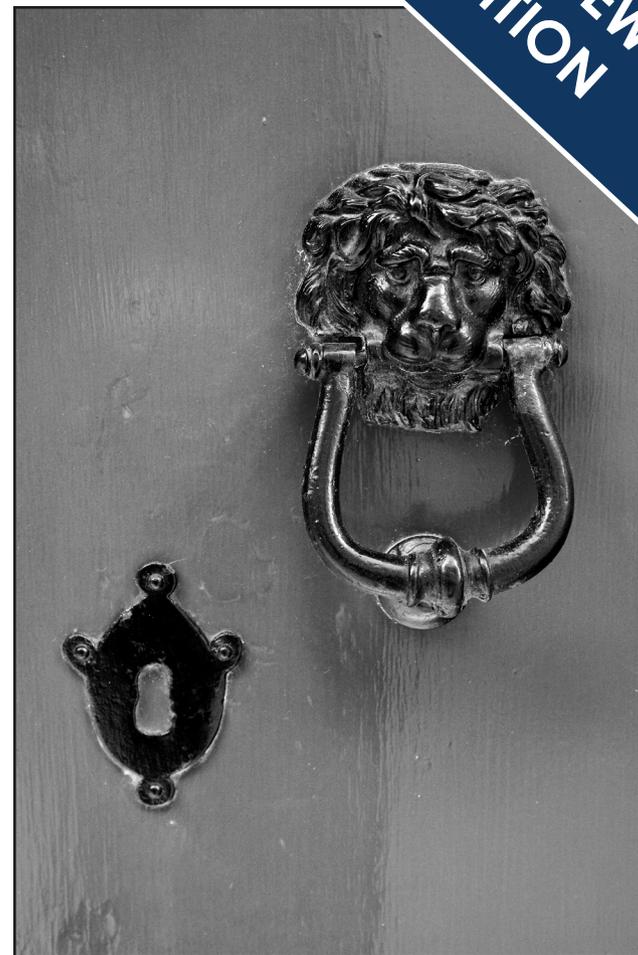
Monochrome film however, captured a monotone image, but most did not react to all the colours equally. The image is made up of shades of grey so the subject has to have a sufficiently strong shape, contrast, or texture to make the photograph work. Many good colour images will work as monochromes, but only a few will produce stunning monochrome images. Most monochrome images will not be as dramatic in colour. Digital cameras have taken the control a lot further, with more of the adjustments now possible in camera, at the time of taking the image.

The photographer has to work a little harder with monochrome photography to ensure that the metering, contrast (often referred to as tonal range) and framing are correct for the picture.

They also have to be aware of the way different colours reproduce in monochrome, as a striking image in colour can easily fail as a monochrome image as the tonal values in the picture are too similar.



The images above show how dramatically this change in tones can affect the image that we are producing. The image in colour has very rich striking tones and make a very eye catching image. The image when taken in monochrome loses much of its impact as the rich red is rendered as a mid grey tone and fails to contrast adequately with the darker door furniture.



One of the things that we have to learn to recognise when shooting monochrome images to be able to visualise what the image will look like in monochrome tones and therefore work out if it will work as an image. Of course in this digital age a simple way of doing that is simply take the image in monochrome and see how it is reproducing.

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## Chapter 02

# Looking back at monochrome film



## Why look back at film techniques

In order to understand what black and white photography is all about, you really do need to understand how black and white images were captured on film and then printed.

This is due to the very different processes involved in the production and the fact that the photographer normally did the whole process from start to finish – this means that they had a lot more creative input, than we had with colour images that were normally commercially printed in a lab.

If you have shot black and white film in the past, you may even have done some of these processes yourself. If not, you are going to be surprised by how much variation was available to the keen photographer.

In many instances in the past, it was the skill in the darkroom and not just the skill in taking that made such stunning images. Ansell Adams is possibly one of the best examples of this.

As time went on, professional photographers often employed speciality printers to print their images for them and sometimes these attained almost as much celebrity status as the photographer themselves.

So by understanding the variations available in the past, we can see more clearly the ways that we can shoot digitally, that allow us to mimic totally all the past techniques.



The images above were shot in the 1950's on a roll film camera, I have photographed them on a light box to show the negative images and then simply inversed the image to produce a "positive" version of the image so you can see the subjects more clearly.

The images look a little flat as that is all that would have been done, the exposures would need to be adjusted if being printed correctly and the contrast can also be changed within the printing process.

It is this flexibility at the printing stage that made traditional monochrome photography very different to what many of us have experienced shooting film and having it commercially printed.

## The traditional monochrome process explained



Black and white was traditionally shot on negative film, which was exposed to give good shadow detail.

As we dealt with negatives, everything was reversed to when looking at digital images. Underexposed negatives are very light, overexposed negatives are dark. However, once printed the images become the same as those we deal with in digital today.

For those that have shot black and white films

in the past, one of the biggest differences to get used to is the very limited latitude that is given by digital compared to what we could get away with when shooting black and white negatives.

The negative examples that I am showing above would all reproduce relatively well if printed traditionally, the overexposed and normal negatives would be almost indistinguishable in the final results, the one from the underexposed negative would be a little flatter and possibly

lacking a small amount of shadow detail but still would produce an acceptable print.

Generally when shooting any negative film it was better to err on the side of overexposure as those negatives could be easily printed correctly.

Digital has the opposite with its latitude, it will tolerate quite a lot of underexposure, but even a small amount of overexposure can be very hard if not impossible to recover.

## The traditional monochrome process explained

Different films were available to give differing effects. Some were high contrast, some gave good tonal range, some were fine grain and others had exaggerated grain effects.

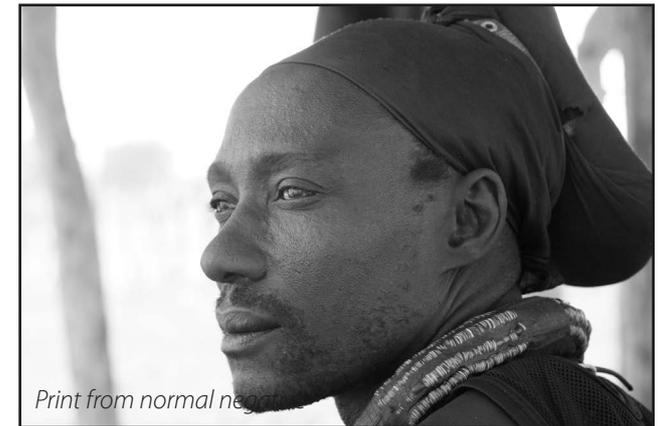
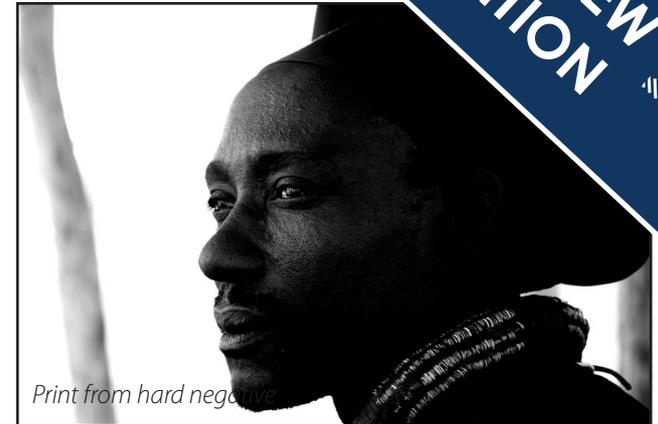
Black and white was often developed by hand – many different developers were available which produced negatives of different types. Some had good tonal range and others were very high contrast. Therefore, there was a lot of variation available in just the shooting and development. The amount of agitation during the development could also change the contrast found in the resulting negatives.

Negatives were described as Hard (high contrast), Normal or Soft (low contrast). There are some subjects where a hard negative would give you the effect that you wanted, others required a normal or soft negative to get the contrast as you wanted it.

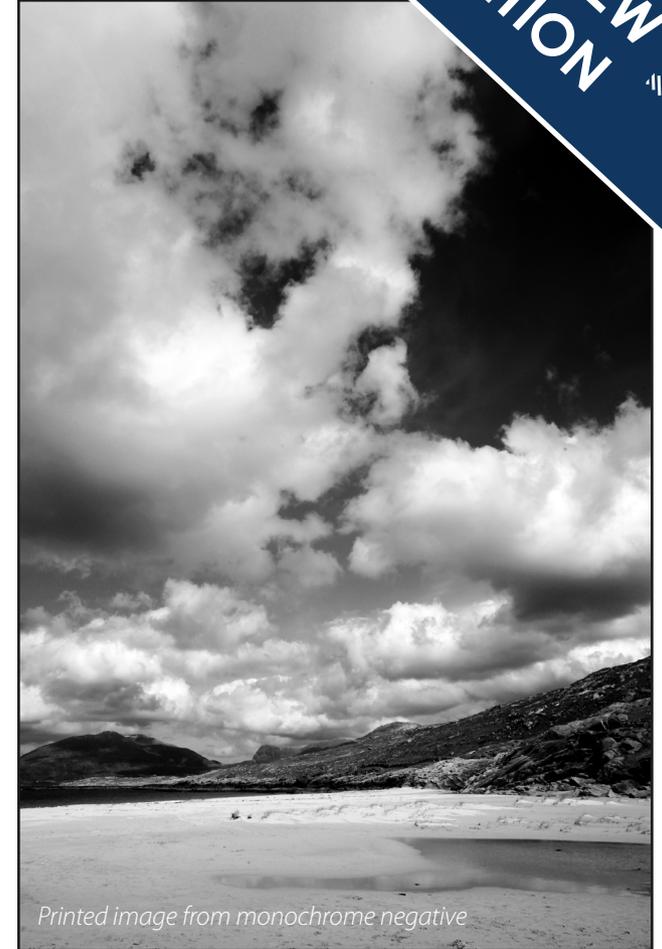
The results to the right show the effect that the different types of negative would have given if printed normally. You can see there is a lot of difference in how the image looks just from how the negative is developed.

It is important to understand how much flexibility is achievable with monochrome film as all these effects are available within the digital process, either at the time of shooting or for some effects within the post production process

If you got a roll of black and white commercially printed, the results were often disappointing, unless you took it to a specialist black and white



## The traditional monochrome process explained



printer that still printed by hand. As many of the effects that we are looking at were lost within commercial processing.

In black and white photography, the negative was very important, as it could be very difficult to get the result that you required, if a negative was underexposed or overexposed. The resulting negatives were difficult to produce prints from,

but also if the contrast was too high or low, then this would also affect how the final image looked.

Today in colour photography, there is a strong emphasis on getting as much tonal range as possible, so seeing into the shadows and retaining the highlights, has almost become a priority in colour photography today. Strangely,

although this gives an image with lots of detail in monochrome, it often does not give the best result.

A subject such as the one above with strong contrast will often work well in either monochrome or colour.

## Printing monochrome negatives



Within the printing of black and white, there was also a lot of variation that could be produced.

Printing was again, mostly by hand, onto different grades of paper, which either gave good tonal contrast or soft subtle tones.

The paper grades ranged from a grade 1 which was describes as soft, this gave a very good tonal range but quite a flat looking image. Grade 3 was considered the normal grade to use and gave a good balance between contrast and details. Grade 5 was referred to as a hard paper and gave a very high contrast image with only a limited tonal range.

The paper grade that was used, also had an effect on how the image looked as is shown in the images above. The most commonly used papers were grades three and four, normally on negatives that were already quite contrasty.

So black and white printing became a bit of a black art, everyone had their own personal recipe that worked for them, in fact remarkably similar to how some areas of digital imaging have developed.



## Papers for monochrome and toning effects



Papers were generally neutral, giving a straight black and white image, on a white paper. However, papers were available that gave a warm image, with rich brownish blacks on a creamy rather than white paper.

It was also possible to get cool tone papers, which had an almost blue white base and very cold looking blacks. The warm tones were the

more popular of the two, especially for portrait work.

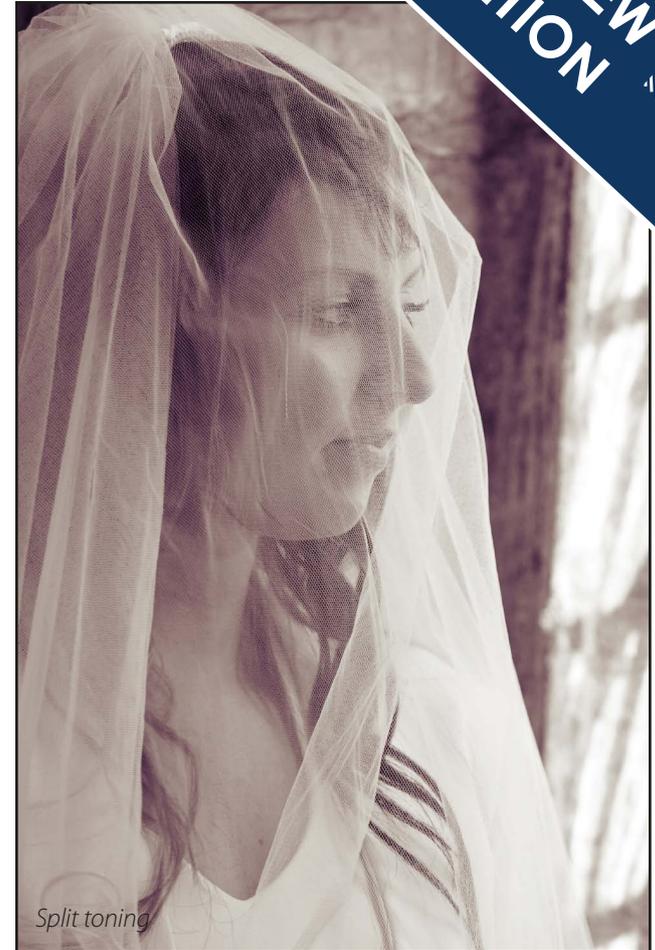
Warm and cool tone papers gradually were less seen from the 1980's onwards when the resin coated papers became more popular as they were easier to handle and dry.

However, now traditional monochrome photography has found itself a bespoke niche in

the market, more of the specialist surface papers have appeared catering for this very specialist market.

Today these supplies are only available through a few very specialist outlets, with the majority of monochrome images being produced using digital cameras.

## Tinting and toning monochrome images



There were also other options. Once you had produced your print, you also had the option of toning it with various chemicals. The most commonly seen of these was the sepia toning, which is an effect that many people will associate with very old images, which were often toned into a warm colour which could help to extend their life span.

In more recent times sepia toning has been used to either give rich warm tones to an image or even replicate an old fashioned appearance to an image.

Although sepia was the most commonly seen, there were many other types of toners available that gave tones of all colours. A more specialist technique was to use two different chemicals

that toned different parts of the image and this gave an image where the highlights were toned one colour and the shadows went a different colour.

All of the traditional treatments can be mimicked in the digital darkroom and in fact are easier, more consistent and less messy (and smelly) to achieve.

## Dodging and burning when printing

There was also a lot of adjustment that went on in the black and white darkroom, with images being dodged and burnt in, to give the tones that were required.

To burn in an image you give some parts of the image more exposure than others and this will make those areas go darker.

To dodge parts of the image you put something in the way of parts of the image and this allowed less light onto the paper and those parts of the image would be lighter as a result of being held back.

This enabled images to be modified from what the photographer shot. It was a way of controlling the tonal range in the image.



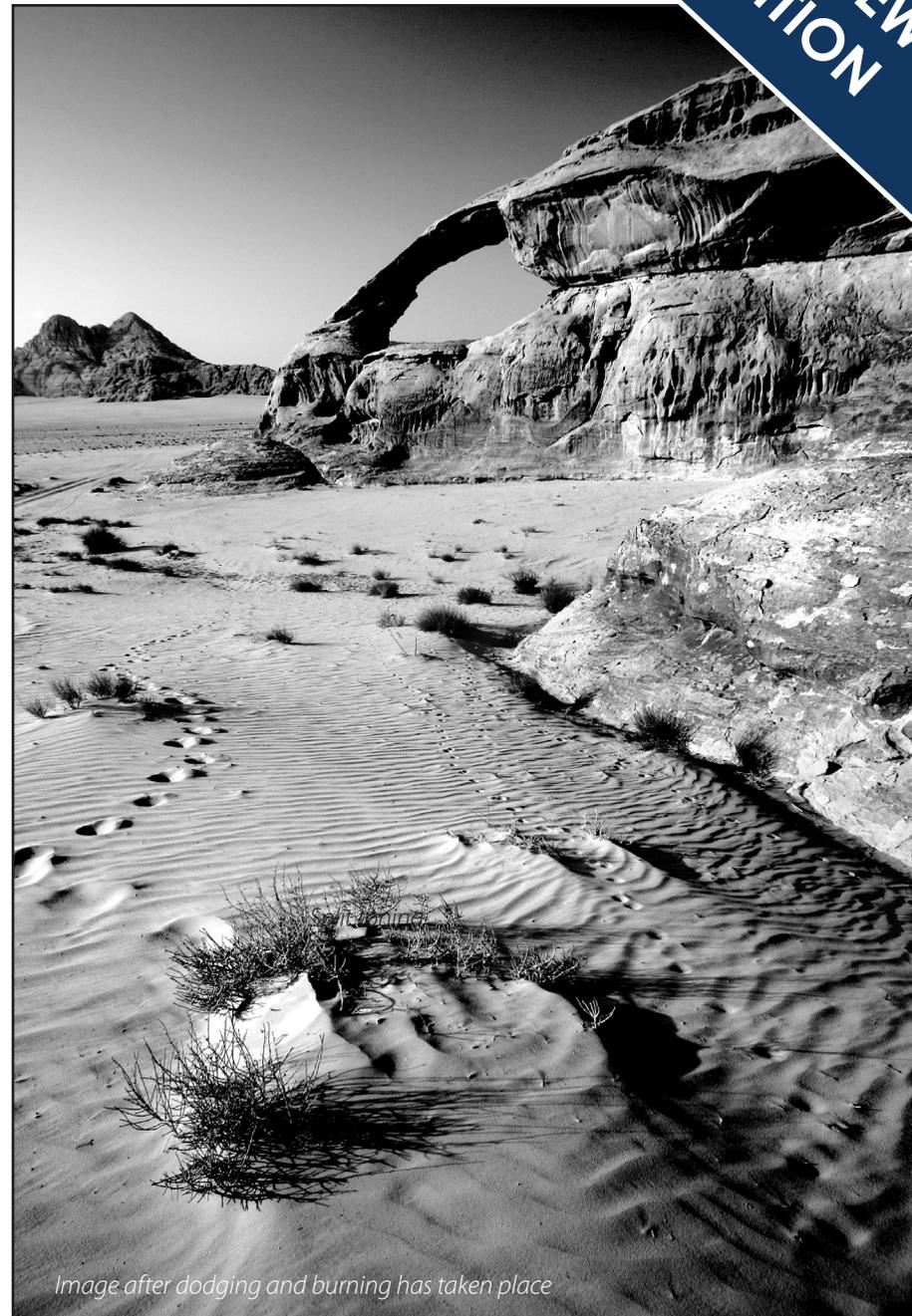
*Straight image*

For example, burning in the sky will make the sky more dramatic or you might hold back the shadows to stop them going too dark.

This was mostly done using hands, cardboard cut into shapes and pieces of wire to support the shapes, during the printing process. The better you were at dodging and burning the better the images you produced.

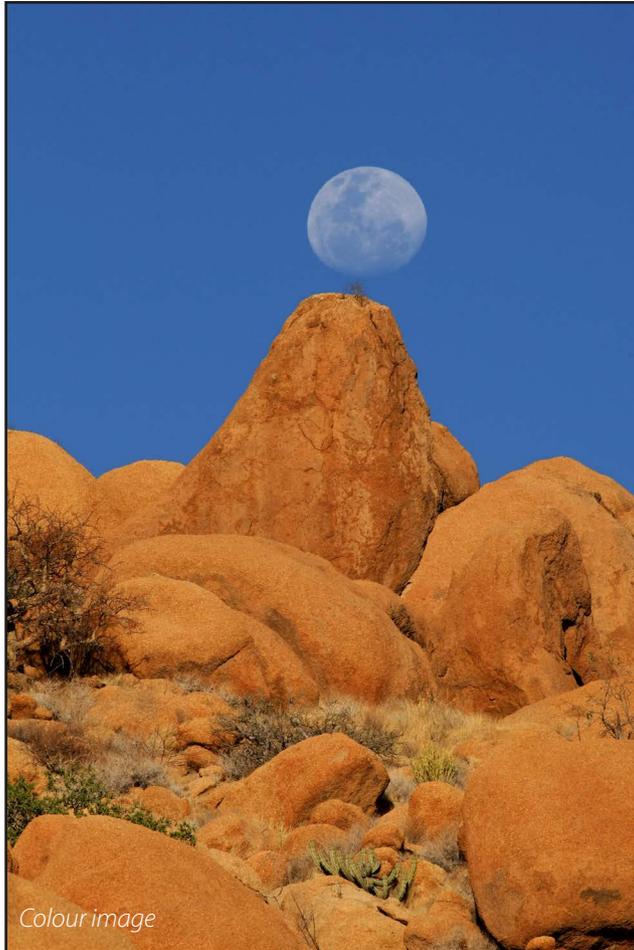
One of the things that is probably now making sense is why you need to start with a good negative that has a good range of tones in it. Although in a straight print the details may not show up, they can be brought back into the image within the printing process.

One of the photographers that was very good at dodging and burning (or manipulation of the image as he called it), was Ansel Adams, who had a reputation for being an exceptional landscape photographer from the USA. Although a good photographer he was truly a master in the darkroom and throughout his life time reworked many of his earlier images to give better and more striking images than he had originally produced.



*Image after dodging and burning has taken place*

## Using filters when shooting monochrome images



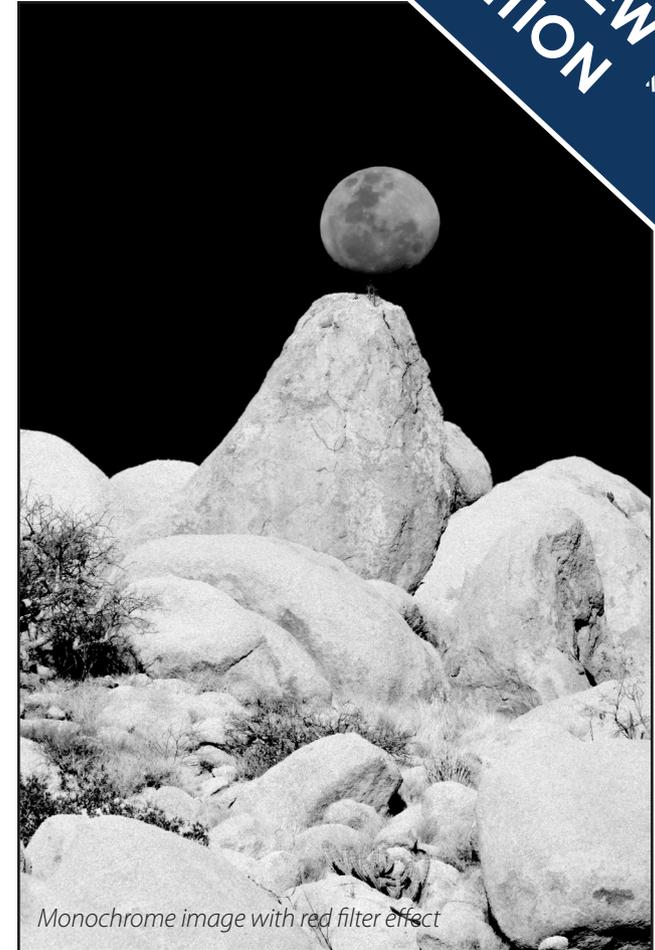
You might think that there is already more than enough variation to take a black and white image traditionally.

However, it does not end there, another technique was to modify the tones in the image so they reproduced better. This was achieved, by using coloured filters, which filtered the light, preventing some wavelengths from getting



through, which would in turn make that colour lighter on the negative and hence darker on the final print.

This image above was taken digitally, in the centre without any filter effect and by using a red filter effect on the right hand image. This could have been done on film to produce the same effect for well over 100 years.



One of the problems that affected monochrome images, was that the films did not record colours with tones that match how we see the image.

This was due to the films being panchromatic, which means that they are more sensitive to blue violet and ultra violet spectrums of light, in addition to seeing some of the other colours at a reduced intensity.

## Using filters when shooting monochrome images



This caused problems for the photographer, as what we see, is not what we are getting on the image. This made it difficult to interpret what we are going to end up with, as a final image.

To overcome some of these problems, there used to be specially designed colour filters, which were used when shooting black and white photographs. These filtered out the excessive UV and blue light, and can be used to darken skies and modify tones.

When we filter light, we are blocking some of the colours from passing through the filter. In the case of an orange filter, it will allow its own colour, and some colours that are close on the spectrum to it, through the filter and these areas will become lighter. However, colours from the other end of the spectrum are blocked. Therefore, the film will receive little or no light from areas of the photograph with these colours in it, so the negative will become clearer, with the image being darker in these areas.

The centre area in the image to the right has had the effect of an orange filter applied to it and you can see quite a dramatic effect on some of the tones in the image.



## Using filters when shooting monochrome images



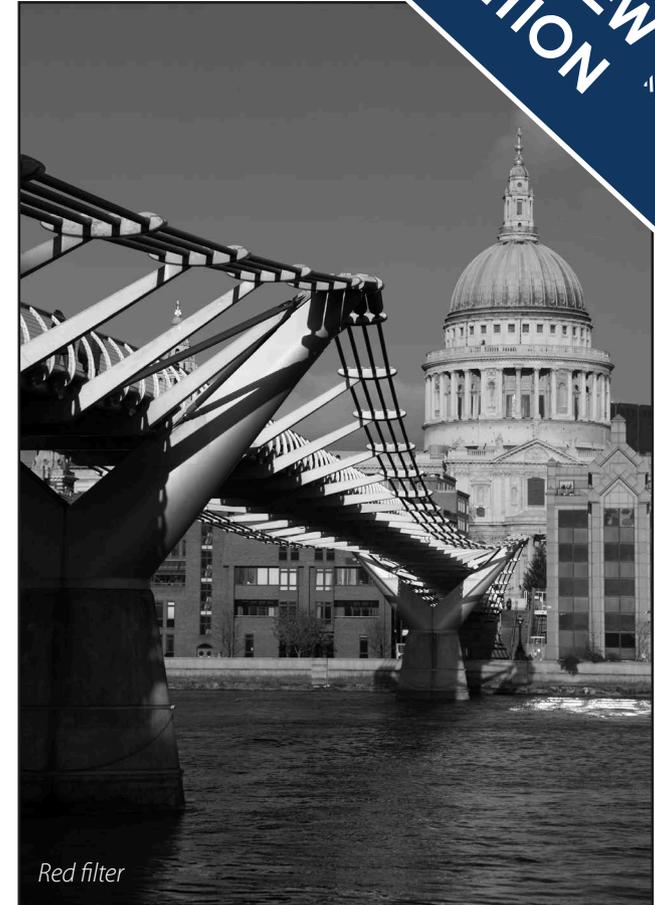
### Yellow filters

A yellow filter is often used in place of a UV or skylight for black and white workers. A yellow filter lets through yellow light, some orange and green, a little red and small amounts of blue. Violet and UV light are blocked and so the sky will be darker than if no filter was used, but will still appear to be natural. Only a small light loss resulted when using the filter.



### Orange filters

An orange filter will let through orange, some red and yellow, and small amounts of green. Virtually all the blue and violet light is blocked which will result in the sky reproducing darker than is natural, enhancing the contrast between the blue sky and clouds. An orange filter gives quite a realistic tonal range and will help define the detail in buildings, in addition to giving improved contrast and a better tone to the sky.



### Red filters

Red filters are used to produce surreal effects. The sky will go very dark and green foliage will generally darken down.

Reds in the image will lighten, or go almost white. Red filters produce the most dramatic images. The red filter was available in two strengths the deep red giving the best results but with a large light loss of generally 3 stops or more.

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