

## Dawn Photography

### Pre-sunrise—calm, serene

2021-02-16

I have been calling this "my light".

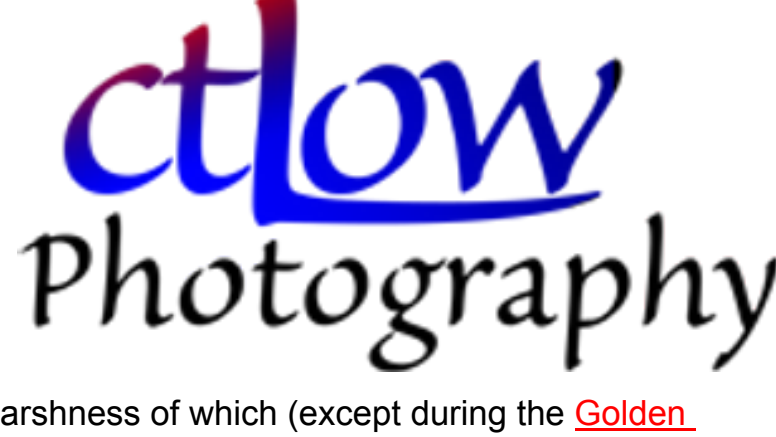
I like **light**. It matters most, for a photographer, to have some!

I enjoy "created light", as in a studio. I have worked often in full sun, the severity and harshness of which (except during the **Golden Hour**) require some forceful, if nuanced, taming. I really like fog. Overcast light presents its own challenges, but can work very well when large swaths of sky do not intrude.

But if, in some hypothetical scenario, I had to choose only one light to work with, to the exclusion of all others, then I would brook no doubt: I opt for dawn, by which in my case I mean specifically the hour before sunrise.

My last blog, on **Sunrises**, mentioned that five minutes after the sun comes up, I may—not every time—simply put my camera gear away.

Post-sunset light behaves similarly, but pre-sunrise light, with its quiet world, simply suits me.



One of the (justifiably world-famous) Thousand Islands

We have a variety of dawn lights to work with, usually involving shades of red (nearer the sun) or blue, hardly ever green.



Brockville—docks along the east shore

Let me mention, for any interested photographers, about the **exposure**. In order to reproduce the actual darkness of a pre-sunrise light, I often darken the in-the-camera exposure, using an exposure value ("EV") of -1 or even less. But, by adjusting the shutter speed, we can quite easily make it look as bright or as dark as we want, and I know of no **art-rule** mandating fidelity. I often liked it dark, through the lens, and so produce it dark. Exposures closer to neutral will often offer, I believe, easier editing, from where one can darken them (or lighten them) to taste. So I will often use that EV of -1, even if I wish to darken it further later.

Using mid-apertures and an ISO of 200, I find that the exposures shorten from about 30 seconds, let's say 45 minutes prior to sunrise, to values of around 1/30 second, just before sunrise. (So, this pretty well always requires a sturdy tripod.)



Thousand Islands Bridge (Canadian span)



Prescott Harbour, beacon, old pilings, Johnstown Bridge, fog (and ... mauve!)



very cold (about -20C) river fog in an east wind

You'll notice in the previous blog a sister-image to the one above... made a few minutes later as the sun poked out. (Don't worry, I was dressed for the conditions, and nowhere near wilderness.)

A word about **white-balance** ("WB"). In clear skies, prior to sunrise, should one set the WB to "sun", or "shade"? (I don't use "Auto" for my serious work, especially if I might want a series to all have the same mood.) In cloudy skies: set the WB to "shade", or "cloud"?

Well, you can sort all of this out later in the digital darkroom, especially if working from "raw" files (but JPEGs can do), but I find myself very often returning (even if cloud covers three-quarters of the sky) to the "sun" setting. It will give you that intense blue in the sky, at a time when the near-darkness still looks close to black to the eye—or at least to my eye—but we humans cannot view it like a camera, with a 30-second exposure; the eye/brain sight apparatus simply doesn't work that way. As far as I can determine, blue represents the true colour, but really, who cares? I have looked at it with the colour-temperature adjusted all up and down the scale, and often—not always—revert to "sun" and let it go blue.

And you will hear about the **"Blue Hour"** (less often than the Golden Hour), which means that the general photographic community seems to feel similarly.



Morristown NY water tower through river fog

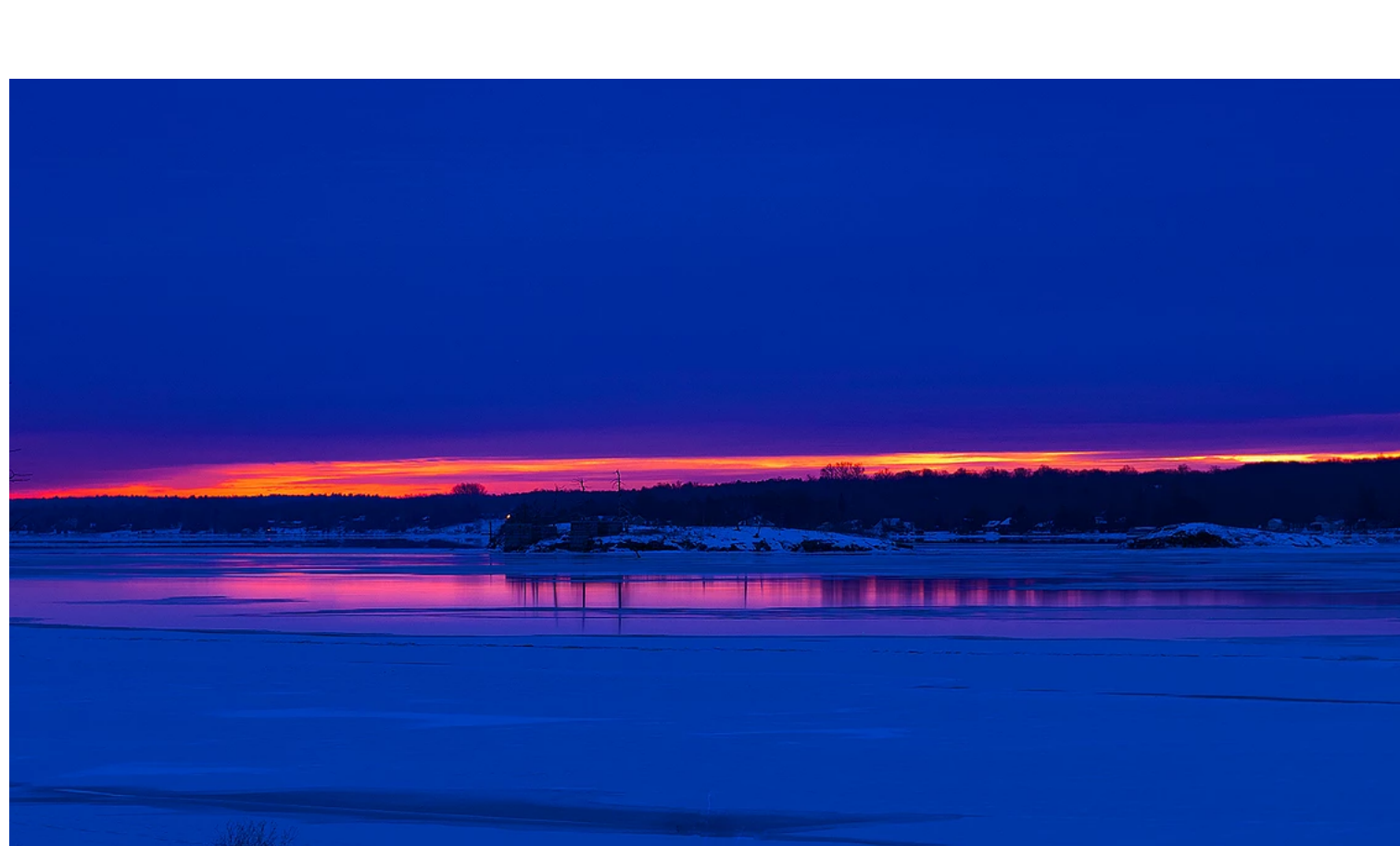
However, the red/orange above—starting with the WB set to "sun"—indicates that the sun will rise nearby soon (and I love the look), but what to do when cloud or fog obscure the sun completely?

With heavy cloud-cover (confession time) I often choose the option of staying home, but ... I will hoist my weary carcass out of bed for fog.

Anyway, let's say that we have chosen to work under cloudy skies; then we're going to experiment, and I sometimes do better by using the "Shade" (not "Cloud") setting. Know your camera. Use your eye. Decide whether you wish to represent the scene accurately, or to take artistic license. (If in doubt, I favour taking license!) In the following, I thought it worked best by abandoning colour completely.



Brockville waterfront east in heavy fog—black-and-white



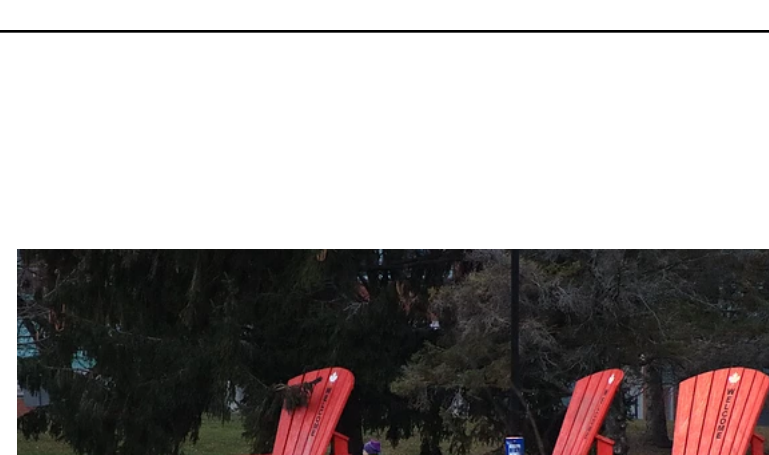
Island reflection in a patch of open water, from a sliver of light along the horizon

And then, how much do I allow myself to **manipulate** the colour later, in editing? I allow myself to do whatever I like, thank you very much, and so far the Photographic Purity Association has not caught up with me. Often, I use editing to restore fidelity to a photograph, which sounds counter-intuitive, but it often works out like that. However, if I want to change the colours (which I usually do not), or saturate them more intensely (which I usually do), then I do.

(To the few paleo-art-critics: live with it.)

I find, in my files, 345 labelled with "dawn". Here I have shown eight recent examples, which cannot possibly illustrate all of the moods of dawn (many still waiting for me to discover), but which I hope have given an enjoyable overview.

Not that "serene" and "calm" always describe dawn. Another future topic could be "violent dawns" - they happen too, and often provide wonderful photographic opportunities.



Me, out at dawn -courtesy K. Fetter

Check out my **gallery** for many more images, in all kinds of light. Almost everything is for **sale**, and I have established ways of getting prints to you using contact-less pandemic protocols.

Thank you all so much for reading. Please i) refer friends to this blog, and ii) kindly consider signing up on the main **blog** page ("junk" email address suggested), or **ask** me for assistance.

Charles T. Low  
Photographer  
Blog #61

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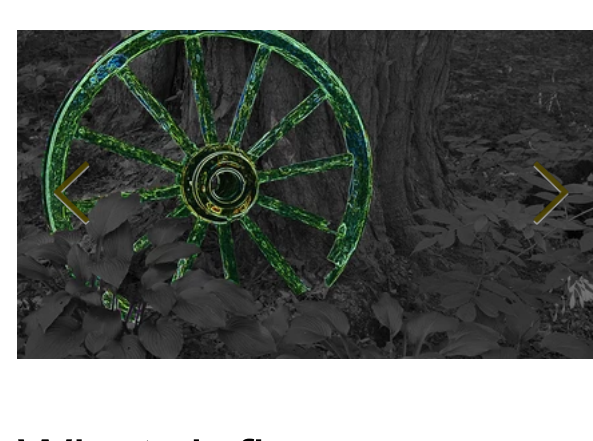
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**Carole Bourret**  
Enjoyed your photos. You are really enjoying all that you have learned. I have not taken many photos lately except of my family - mostly grandchildren from 40 years to under 1 year old. I have 8 grandchildren, 5 step grandchildren, 8 great grandchildren and 4 step great grandchildren. I usually have 30-35 sit down to Christmas Dinner, but NOT this year. My brother lost his wife in Dec. 2019 and is not doing very well at 92 1/2 years old. He is my big concern right now so spare time is NIL. Staying safe and missing all my BYC friends

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