

# Claire Thomas

Dodging bullets and sitting on IEDs, Claire Thomas has had a charmed life as a conflict photographer. Now locked down in New York, she tells Keith Wilson why she's missing the Middle East...

All images: Claire Thomas



## Claire Thomas Profile

- Born and raised in Wales, Claire Thomas is a photojournalist and fine art photographer based in New York.
- After graduating in politics from University of the West of England, Claire focused on Europe's refugee crisis, the frontline battle against ISIS in Iraq, and humanitarian issues in Palestine, Ghana and other countries.
- Claire's images have been published worldwide by *The Sunday Times*, *National Geographic*, *The Guardian* and Al Jazeera, and by international NGOs including Amnesty International, Oxfam, Save the Children and UNHCR.
- Her work has been shortlisted at the 2017 Press Gazette British Journalism Awards, 2018 UK Picture Editors' Guild Awards and the 2018 Amnesty International UK Media Awards.
- She has judged international photo contests including the Amnesty International UK Media Awards and the 2021 Xposure International Photography Festival Awards.

[www.clairethomasphotography.com](http://www.clairethomasphotography.com)

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Although based in New York, where baseball, basketball and even pinball are better known than rugby, you can be sure Claire Thomas will find somewhere in the Big Apple to watch her beloved Wales in the Six Nations. A life in photojournalism may have taken the girl out of the Welsh Valleys, but you can't take the Valleys out of the girl. "I really enjoy watching the rugby," she declares. "Wherever I go I try to watch it. Even when I was in Mongolia in October 2019, I wasn't going to miss the match, and we found a pub that was showing it."

A pub? In Mongolia? Showing the rugby? I sound incredulous, but the excitement in Claire's voice is simply irresistible. "Yep! We were in the capital city (Ulan Bator) and I think it was an Irish pub and they had the big screen and everybody was drinking and it was all very surreal. I'd only just arrived and did not feel like I was in Mongolia!"

With that level of dedication, and lockdown still in force, I say she'll have no excuse for missing the Six Nations at all this time around. "Is it

happening? Really? When does it start? You've made my day!" This interview has officially kicked off...

**Apart from rugby, what were the other early experiences growing up in Wales that contributed to your life path now?**

Strangely, everything that has led to where I am is borne out of my love of horses. I grew up in a tiny village in rural south Wales. We had 25 people in my primary school, lots of countryside and all I cared about was horses at that time. I had my pony and that was all I cared about. Then, when I was at university in England, I was studying politics, I had a chance to work as a cowgirl on a ranch in Wyoming in the US. It was so dramatic and so beautiful that I wanted to find a way to show people back home what I was seeing, and that's when my interest in photography took off.

**“We got lost in the desert, we found out that we'd been sitting on an IED, I had a bullet pass my head...”**

**Previous page: An Iraqi soldier poses for the camera while the smoke of burning oil wells set fire by retreating ISIS militants covers the wreckage of Gayyara.**

**Camera:** Nikon D610  
**Lens:** 24-70mm f/2.8  
**Exposure:** 1/200 sec, f/4.5, ISO100

**Right: A Palestinian boy cries after being hit by a car in the city of Hebron in the occupied West Bank.**

**Camera:** Nikon D610  
**Lens:** 24-70mm f/2.8  
**Exposure:** 1/160 sec, f/3.2, ISO200

**Below: This injured, malnourished two-month-old baby survived after being treated by a paramedic in a makeshift clinic during the battle of Mosul.**

**Camera:** Nikon D610  
**Lens:** 24-70mm f/2.8  
**Exposure:** 1/200 sec, f/3.2, ISO1250



**Were you thinking of pursuing photography at all while you were at university?**

At university, I was more focused on international affairs and relations. I studied the policies of African countries and I did my dissertation on corruption in Kenya. I felt incredibly frustrated while I was studying, because I learned better by seeing things first-hand for myself, by seeing what was actually happening on the ground, so it took me a while to initially get into photojournalism.

I knew that I wanted to do photography full-time, but I didn't know which path I wanted to pursue. Just after I finished university I went to Ghana for a volunteer project, and

then my approach to photography changed because I was taking photographs of women who were suffering from HIV/Aids.

**How did you meet them?**

I was working with this small organization that was supporting them. I launched this campaign to provide beds for the women because they were sleeping on the bare ground and they were all telling me one of the things they really needed was a bed. It was my photographs that pushed the campaign forward and I felt that people could relate to it quite easily. I raised the money and went back to buy and deliver the beds and took pictures again with their beds in their homes. →

**\* WOMEN WITHOUT STATUS**

**CLAIRE COVERS THE ISIS WOMEN LEFT BEHIND AFTER THE WAR IN IRAQ...**

**Was this story your idea?**

Some of those interviews I did on behalf of Amnesty International and others for Oxfam, but most I did on my own. I paid for a fixer, and out of my own curiosity I wanted to learn the stories of these women who were left behind and how they felt about their husbands' choices to join ISIS. We went to camps and interviewed many of them. They were such nice women, but you never know what they really think. Some still support ISIS, although they're not keen to say that to journalists. It's a situation that's ongoing, women are stuck in camps and they can't return to their communities because they will face persecution by other community members.





That changed my idea of photography. I felt inspired by that.

### So, you haven't had any formal training as a photographer?

No. I just read a bunch of photography books and, over several years, I travelled and just took pictures for myself, so eventually I just taught myself.

### Did you have any mentors?

I did. I was lucky. When I realized I wanted to do photojournalism full-time, I had no frame of reference. I didn't know anyone in the industry, I didn't know where to begin, so I was browsing websites of photographers whose work I admired and I came across this guy called Jason Tanner.

He'd been working a lot for UNHCR and photographing Angelina Jolie's work as a goodwill ambassador, so I reached out to him and from that moment he's been mentoring me. I owe him a lot. He would write me long emails and critique my work, and he taught me about photo essays and how to pitch, so I was very lucky to have that guidance.

### Where was your first experience of conflict photography?

Before I was in Iraq, I had done quite a bit of work in the West Bank, in Palestine, which, in some ways, was more frightening than Iraq. I had a taster of what it's like to be in dangerous situations. I feel like I had more frightening moments there. I had the tear gas, I had a stun grenade thrown at my feet, but there was still something quite special about Palestine.

### How do you mean?

I felt comfortable as soon as I got there! The people are very welcoming. I lived in Hebron a few months and I kept going back. That was my first experience and then I was just telling stories about daily life for Palestinians living under occupation and what it was like having confrontations with Israeli soldiers and settlers.

### Why did you choose to go there in the first place?

I always felt drawn to go. Ever since my studies in politics I wanted to try to understand the situation because I really had no idea. I'd studied it, but I couldn't understand what it was



actually like for people living there, so going really helped. I also did a few stories there. Then I started covering the refugee crisis. I went to Calais, 'The Jungle', and spent a lot of time in Greece, where I met a lot of Iraqi and Kurdish families that had fled ISIS. I had always wanted to go to Kurdistan, so, on a spur of the moment decision, I booked a flight to Irbil (Kurdish Iraq).

### That's a big decision, given what was going on there at the time...

I didn't think it was possible for an independent freelancer to just go and cover the war, so my plan was to focus on the people who had been displaced by ISIS. When I got to Irbil, I did a few days hostile environment training and then I discovered that it's quite easy to access the frontline. You just pay a fixer and off you go. That's when it began. I went to Iraq originally for two weeks, but ended up staying for almost three years.

**I had a stun grenade thrown at my feet, but there was still something quite special about Palestine**

**Above: Young men from Afghanistan sit inside a hut where they lived in the Calais refugee camp, better known as 'The Jungle'.**

**Camera:** Nikon D610  
**Lens:** 24-70mm f/2.8  
**Exposure:** 1/20 sec, f/2.8, ISO5000

**Above right: French riot police clash with refugees ahead of their eviction from 'The Jungle', Calais.**

**Camera:** Nikon D610  
**Lens:** 70-200mm f/4  
**Exposure:** 1/100 sec, f/4, ISO3200

**Right: Israeli soldiers detain four Palestinians, including children, on their way home after a vigil commemorating the Ibrahim Mosque massacre in Hebron.**

**Camera:** Nikon D610  
**Lens:** 24-70mm f/2.8  
**Exposure:** 1/100 sec, f/2.8, ISO5000

### What did it feel like when you first got there?

The first day I arrived in Irbil I felt at home, the same feeling I had in Palestine. But, of course, covering the war was something completely different from Palestine. The risks were much, much, greater. My first day going to the frontline was quite wild, there were so many close calls: we got lost in the desert, we found out that we'd been sitting on an IED, I had a bullet pass my head. It was all quite bizarre.

### And that was all on day one?

Day one, yeah! After that, it was much calmer.

### I imagine in such scenarios you want to travel light, so what is the core gear that you always take?

Now, I have a Nikon D850, which is incredible. Before I had a D610. And it's the 24-70mm f/2.8 lens that I always have. That's my workhorse because it does everything I need it to do. That's the basics, and then I have a 70-200mm lens. In Mongolia I tried riding horses with both cameras and both lenses, but it was just a bit too ridiculous!

### What about accessories and other bits, such as batteries?

I probably have 10 spare batteries. When I was staying in Mosul, I thought I wouldn't have access →







to electricity to charge them, but of course we did! But just in case I always take lots of spare batteries and loads of memory cards. They are the essentials.

#### What about workflow and post-production? It can't be easy in a war zone or even a refugee camp?

I sometimes get overwhelmed with post-production, I just have so many photographs to go through. I have my laptop with me wherever I go and throw everything into Lightroom, put everything on my hard drives, then select the few that I need. I always know when I've got a good picture because it gives you that exciting feeling – it's so rare – of knowing that I've got a really great shot to come to.

Many of your photos from the battle of Mosul are harrowing.

#### How do you keep yourself safe in such circumstances?

Being a freelancer, we don't have any external guidance. When I've worked with the *Sunday Times*, there are risk assessments and you have to have the right kind of gear and everything like that, but as a freelancer there's none of that. The main thing is working with a good fixer. It's not possible to do the job without them.



**Katie placed the bleeding child onto my lap and instructed me to hold her still while she inserted a needle into her chest**

Above: Katie Batrouney, a paramedic from Australia, carries a child injured in the battle of Mosul to an ambulance after providing life-saving pre-hospital care at a trauma stabilization point, set up inside an abandoned store on the edge of the old city.

Camera: Nikon D610  
Lens: 24-70mm f/2.8  
Exposure: 1/250 sec, f/2.8, ISO640

We rely on them quite a lot about what's acceptable and what the risks are. When I did the hostile environment training they gave us some tips to mitigate some of the risks, but there are always going to be IEDs as a threat. There are basic things, like always letting someone know where we're going and when we expect to be back.

#### Did you also team up with another photographer or journalist?

Yes, because I could never afford a fixer on my own! Their day rates were very high, so I would work with other photographers, but I didn't like travelling from Irbil to Mosul for the day, spending all this money on a fixer, going into the frontline for a couple of hours, then rushing back to Irbil before it got dark to get through the checkpoints. That wasn't working for me, I wasn't seeing the human

cost of the conflict. We were focusing on the military offensive, which is very important, but it doesn't give you the whole picture.

#### So, what did you do?

I knew there was a team of medics working behind the frontline, so I tried persuading them to let me be with them in Mosul, and eventually they agreed. That was life changing.

#### Did those medics work for a particular NGO or country?

The NGO is called Global Response Management. It was set up during the battle. I spent most of my time working with the female medics, because I was blown away by what they were doing. They were young women and the way they worked was awe-inspiring. They were paramedics or nurses, so they were well trained, well prepared, but I don't think anything can prepare you for the reality of a war like that. They worked day and night. I would pass out at the end of the day because the days were long, but they would just get up in the middle of the night, there would be soldiers coming into base, they'd be treating them. It was moving.

#### You're trained in battlefield first aid, did you ever have to use it?

Thankfully no. The medics were always there. My battlefield first aid training is basic: applying tourniquet, dressing wounds, just the necessary things to stabilize in an emergency if there were no other medics around. There were times when I was able to help by rushing to grab medical supplies or simply offering some emotional support to the patients.

#### Can you give me an example?

One memorable moment was when a little girl was rushed to the clinic with multiple gunshot wounds and other horrific injuries that put her frighteningly close to death. One of the volunteers, Katie Batrouney, a young paramedic from Australia, dressed the wounds to buy the child some time to reach the hospital. As Katie carried her out into the street I decided to set my camera aside and accompany her in the ambulance, hoping I could help in some way. As the ambulance sped along the war-torn streets of western Mosul, the child's terror-filled

## \* FINE ART ALTERNATIVE

During the Covid-19 lockdowns, Claire has given more time to building up the fine art print side of her work...

#### Is there a subject or situation where fine art and photojournalism ever meet?

Good question! Fine art is a new avenue for me. Obviously, I'm not going to try and sell the conflict pictures as fine art, but I do think there can be some kind of bridge between fine

art and photojournalism, images that reflect reality but in a very artistic way and tell a story. I'm focusing more on pictures, for example, from Mongolia with the dramatic landscapes and the eagles. They're the ones I've been selling as fine art. I want to focus on the integrity of the photojournalistic approach in fine art, I don't want to do any kind of staged images, I still want them to be accurate reflections of reality.

screams began to weaken until she eventually stopped breathing. With no gurney or medical supplies inside the ambulance, Katie placed the bleeding child onto my lap and instructed me to hold her still while she inserted a needle into her chest, allowing air back into her collapsed lung, and likely saving her life. When we dropped her off at the hospital the little girl was in critical condition, but still breathing. We don't know whether or not she survived.

#### In battle situations like that how are you able to block out emotionally what you are seeing?

It's unimaginable suffering and I never thought I'd see those kinds of things, but I was lucky that the medics were a good support network and every day they would check in and we'd talk about what we'd seen and how we felt. That was very important, to confront those emotions at the time, and there were moments when I was sad and cried. You can still take pictures and be sad and empathetic at the same time. The medics gave me that support, we supported each other, so that was really helpful.

#### How were you, as a photographer, and the medics received by locals?

The local people in Mosul were incredible. We were staying in an abandoned mosque behind the frontline and there was a family that

lived next door and they were making us meals every night, showering us with kindness and hospitality. They were very supportive and it gave some sense of calm. Of course, I will never forget those things I saw, but it was my choice to be there and I'm in an enormously privileged position to be able to leave at the end of the day.

#### Where would you like to be 10 years from now?

That gives me a chance to talk about my long-term project! In 2019, I started on a project that might end up as a book, looking at the relationship between horses and humans. For example, the Kazakh communities in Mongolia. I'd also like to do some in Afghanistan and here in the US, so doing a couple of trips a year to work on that project. I would also like to be making more print sales and continuing with my photojournalism work. I miss the Middle East. Next year, we're moving to Egypt, so I will be able to focus on the Middle East again and spend more time in Iraq and Palestine.

#### You're speaking at the Xposure Festival in Dubai soon, what's the value of events like this to other photographers?

I think events like this are important to showcase the work of photographers, elevate their voices and inspire people to go out and shoot. Many of the photographers at Xposure are well known, so I'm excited to hear about their work.

There's also workshops and I've been asked to do a focus group session with some students. I think these educational events are a fantastic opportunity to bring people together and share a passion for visual storytelling.

#### What's the most important lesson you have learnt as a photographer that others could learn from?

There are so many. Persistence is the most important, and telling stories that are important to you. I always get a better result if I'm connected to the story. Above all, just being a good person and not letting the profession come before humanity, and having empathy and compassion for the people we connect with and who give us a glimpse into their reality. It's such a privilege. ■