

The Past in Focus: Photography and British Columbia, 1858-1914*

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The discovery of gold on the bars of the lower Fraser River created an immediate need to delineate the border of the new mainland colony and produced new markets for goods and services. As a result, the first cameras were brought to British Columbia — not by chance in the incidental baggage of some colonial official or gentleman-adventurer, but by design in the equipment of a military photographer assigned to survey the international boundary and in the belongings of two professional photographers intent upon establishing a portraits-and-views trade in the growing capital of Vancouver Island. From these early scientific and commercial beginnings grew the province's rich photographic heritage to which the essays in this special issue are addressed.

From Australia to British Columbia — wherever gold-seekers with ready cash wanted photographic proof of their travels and exploits — portrait and view photographers flourished. During the California rush, daguerreotypists† had found their own “Eldorado.” Fortunes to be made from silver salts, not gold nuggets, lured them west, then north along the Pacific Coast. The first photographers to come to British Columbia were a diverse lot. Many were English, a few were American, one was Italian and another Swiss. The prospect of a new and lucrative market attracted established photographers to Victoria and prompted local businessmen to change professions. Their commitment to photography varied: some made it a life-long career; many were involved only for a few years, later returning to old trades or embarking upon new ones; a few considered it a part-time undertaking.

* Thanks are due to the Public Archives of Canada, the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, the British Columbia Provincial Museum, the Vancouver City Archives, the Vancouver Public Library, the Kelowna Centennial Museum, the National Museums of Canada, the American Museum of Natural History, the National Anthropological Archives (Smithsonian) and the British Museum for kind permission to reproduce the photographs in this collection.

† A glossary of photographic terms used in the essays is included at the end of this collection.

Among the more prominent commercial photographers in early British Columbia, George Fardon — one of California's first daguerreotypists and a pioneer of the wet-plate process on the west coast — moved his photography business from San Francisco to Victoria, where he carried on a trade in portraits and views from 1858 until his retirement in the early 1870s. Stephen Spencer, Fardon's only competition for the first few years, sold his studio after twenty years to become proprietor of a salmon cannery in Alert Bay. Presumably it was either Fardon or Spencer who was the plaintiff in a lawsuit reported in *The British Colonist* on 23 October 1860:

CURIOUS CASE — Some time since a gentleman of this city died. The widow and friends wished to procure a daguerreotype of his loved features before the body was consigned to the tomb. A photographer was employed and succeeded in obtaining a picture, for which he charged \$20. Payment was declined by the widow, on the ground that while the operator was taking the picture he used and destroyed three handkerchiefs, one sheet, and a bottle each cologne and brandy. The artist sues for the amount, alleging that the sheet and handkerchiefs were necessary, and that owing to the advanced state of decomposition of the body, the cologne and brandy were absolutely required to keep him from fainting while taking the picture.

With the rush to the Cariboo, Victoria received a healthy infusion of artistic talent. Among the professional and amateur, experienced and would-be painters and photographers were William G. R. Hind and Frederick Whympier, Richard and Hannah Maynard, Charles Gentile and Frederick Dally. In 1862, Mrs. Maynard brought her camera from Bowmanville, Canada West, to Victoria, where she carried on a portrait business for fifty years. Her husband, a shoemaker by trade, opened a boot and shoe business, but after learning photography from his wife travelled widely taking landscape views. Both Dally and Gentile began as "Importers of English and Foreign Goods" then turned to photography for their livelihood. After four years Dally left colony and craft to begin a new career in dental surgery. Gentile remained devoted to photography until his death but, like Dally, was active in British Columbia for only four years. Francis Claudet, son of the noted London daguerreotypist A. F. J. Claudet, may be considered one of the province's first amateur photographers while Superintendent of the Assay Office in New Westminster throughout the 1860s. Although early British Columbia was a remote corner of nineteenth-century North America, its photography did not develop in isolation. Advertisements in Victoria newspapers and illus-

trations in foreign periodicals clearly indicate that professional photographers in British Columbia were in contact with photographers, galleries, manufacturers and publishers in London, San Francisco, New York, Montreal and elsewhere; such connections meant exposure to new equipment, new techniques and new ideas.

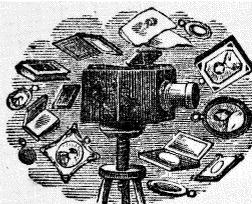
The province's first photographers brought with them the awkward equipment and messy procedures of the wet-collodion process. Their cameras were essentially handsome, light-tight wooden boxes with brass fittings and a simple lens at one end. Because early emulsions were not fast enough to require a shutter, the lens was simply uncapped and re-capped. And since chemical preparation of the negative was essential both immediately before and immediately after exposure in the camera, work away from the studio required a portable darkroom. Boxes of glass plates, large quantities of fresh water, and chests of chemicals had to be hauled everywhere and unpacked and repacked at each location. Encumbered by all this paraphernalia, the intrepid itinerant photographer was subjected to the vagaries of heat, cold, rain, wind and the ubiquitous problem — dust. With all the time and effort required to produce a single negative during the wet-plate era, photography was anything but a candid, haphazard or frivolous undertaking.

Researchers with a variety of interests have developed an appreciation of historical photographs and a set of skills for interpreting them, but their findings are scattered among the conference papers and journal articles of their respective disciplines. Appropriately it was archivists, charged with the collection and care of historical photographs, and sensitive to the needs and interests of a broadly based research community, who organized *Eyes of Time*, the first national conference on history and photography in Canada, in 1978. In conjunction with this event, *Photographs and Archives* (*Archivaria* 5, Winter 1977-78) appeared. This theme issue of the journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists included a cross-section of approaches to the creation, preservation and interpretation of photographic records. Adopting a similar interdisciplinary outlook, this special issue of *BC Studies* emphasizes source rather than subject and exhibits a variety of historical concerns. Its essays explore the wider implications embodied in historical photographs, and its contributors comment on the nature and meaning of historical photographs and suggest their relevance to an understanding of land and life in early British Columbia. They examine photographs in terms of the filters that worked to shape them, treating the images as products of

prevailing technology, local subjects, artistic conventions, Victorian values and market taste.

Many hundreds of photographs are now preserved in archives, museums and libraries throughout the province and elsewhere, providing us with a window on the world of nineteenth-century British Columbia. These historical photographs have long been used to illustrate written text, but as J. Robert Davison points out, such images are often little more than visual oases in a desert of text. To demonstrate that the photographic record should be used to supplement, not merely complement, research into textual sources, he explores the portrait as a social document, probing the nuances of costume, pose and setting to uncover assumptions of photographer, subject and audience. He urges the researcher to explore the discrete details and the underlying significance of the subjects recorded by the camera and concludes with an injunction “to observe” — a conclusion entirely befitting a document popular with a nineteenth-century public who believed that truth was revealed through careful observation and that the camera did not lie.

The photograph, that wondrous offspring of the marriage of optics and chemistry, was a product, an instrument and a record of progress. Its



VAUGHN'S
PHOTOGRAPHIC
GALLERY,

Victoria Theatre, Government Street.

**Visiting Cards, Stereoscopic Views and Portraits,
Ambrotypes, Melainectypes, Photographs
and Tinted Pictures**

Executed in the **BEST STYLE**, and Artistically arranged.

ALL WORK GUARANTEED.

ALBUMS, FRAMES and CASES in Great Variety.

Typical of the rhetoric of the day, this advertisement for Vaughn's [sic] Photographic Gallery appeared in Howard & Barnett's *British Columbian and Victoria Directory* of 1863. John William Vaughan was just one of many talented and aspiring artists and photographers to arrive in Victoria in the fall of 1862. (PA-123700) COURTESY OF THE PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA

ability to fix for all time images of people, places and events gripped the Victorian imagination. For British Columbians who wanted a record of themselves and their loved ones, of familiar surroundings and places in the news, the photograph quickly replaced the painted portrait and landscape. Fast, cheap and accessible to virtually all levels of society, it captured the impatience and excitement of the time and place. But the camera quickly came to be more than a means of recording reality. After much experimentation and debate, photography was adopted as a tool of applied science. "Survey Photography in British Columbia, 1858-1900" concentrates on the practical and scientific applications of photography by government and industry. Author Andrew Birrell traces the camera's use from ancillary apparatus to essential equipment; he describes changing photographic technology and comments on the difficulties of wet-plate, dry-plate and roll film use. From a simple means of illustrating exploration to a superior method of mapping unfamiliar territory, photography was an integral part of the surveys that opened up British Columbia's nineteenth-century frontiers.

Part of the nineteenth-century curiosity about the human condition centred upon the aboriginal peoples of the world. The colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, with their large native populations, differing in appearance and customs from tribe to tribe and Coast to Interior, became a focus of popular interest and scholarly investigation. Photographs and artifacts were eagerly collected, studied and displayed. Cameras were pointed at chiefs and klotchmen, settlements, dwellings, totem poles, gravesites, canoes, and the weirs, traps, racks and caches of the salmon fishery. But photographs of the Indian and his landscape were not always easily obtained. For example, in April 1870 Governor Musgrave wrote to Earl Granville explaining that ethnological photographs could not be procured:

Referring to your Lordship's circular of the 30th November [1869], transmitting a copy of a Letter from Professor Huxley suggesting that Photographs might be collected from the various Colonies, having much Ethnological value as illustrating the peculiarities of the different races within the British Possessions. I have endeavoured to give effect to Your Lordship's desire to further this design. But it has been impracticable to obtain Photographs of the character required. I am informed that no Indians here will consent to be photographed in a state of nudity, although reward has been offered. It is believed that they have a superstitious dread of some hidden purpose which they do not understand, and it would be impossible to explain to them the scientific object of the proceeding.

(Public Archives of Canada. MG 11 C.O. 60/38, pp. 332-33)

Despite the uncertainty of native co-operation, difficulty of access and a limited market among the Indians themselves, a handful of survey photographers and adventurous professionals carried their cameras to the Indian settlements of Vancouver Island, the Queen Charlottes, the northern coast of the Mainland, the Fraser River and the Interior. Frederick Dally and Charles Gentile photographed the Indians of the Interior on their way to and from the Cariboo goldfields. Dally, Richard Maynard, O. C. Hastings and Edward Dossetter accompanied government officials on naval tours of the coastal tribes. Their *carte-de-visite* portraits and landscape views found their way into reports of the Indian Commissioner, accounts in the illustrated press and household albums in Victorian drawing-rooms as well as museum collections as far away as Chicago and London.

The two articles, "Photography of the Indian: Concept and Practice on the Northwest Coast" and "'Copying People': Northwest Coast Native Response to Early Photography," approach archival photographs of British Columbia's Indians from opposite sides of the camera's lens. They explore the motives of the photographers and anthropologists who created the images, the attitudes of the Victorian public that bought them and the reaction of the natives who posed for them. Alan Thomas examines Indian photographs as collectors' items and ethnological specimens, pointing out that photographers produced a filtered image of the province's indigenous population which demonstrates a nineteenth-century conflict between views of the noble savage and the degraded heathen. Margaret Blackman presents a pioneering inquiry into the reaction of British Columbia's Indians to photographs and photographers. Concentrating on images of the Haida of the northwest coast, she traces changing native perceptions of photography from the marketing of *carte* portraits in the 1860s, to the recording of the Haida and their villages in the 1870s, through the introduction of magic lantern slides by missionaries in the 1880s and the intrusion of amateur photographers in the 1890s to the ultimate adoption of the camera and family album by the Indian in the first decade of the twentieth century. In so doing, she observes the evolution of photography from a means of portraying the Indians as others wished to see them to a tool for portraying them as they wished to be seen themselves.

Before the advent of the technology that made possible the printing of photographs and text on the same page, original photographs were an important means of conveying fact, clarifying detail and imparting a

sense of the actual. Sent far and wide to satisfy the visual appetite of family, friends and publishers, photographs became an effective and efficient way of dispatching impressions of life in nineteenth-century British Columbia. As Birrell points out, they were included in the field reports of the North American Boundary Commission, the Geological Survey of Canada and the Canadian Pacific Railway Survey. As well, they formed an integral part of the official findings of the Indian Commissioner examined by Thomas and Blackman. But original albumen prints were also used to illustrate emigrant guides and travel accounts and as a basis for wood-block engravings in the illustrated press. "A Visual Cliché: Five Views of Yale" examines several renderings of one view that came to epitomize the town of Yale. Joan Schwartz and Lilly Koltun discuss the creation of this visual cliché, touching upon its documentary and artistic aspects. Using a representative selection from the many images of Yale, sketched, painted, photographed and engraved within a period of twenty years, they are able to compare the ways in which visual images were disseminated before the advent of photo-mechanical reproduction.

The 1870s were a period of transition in the growth of the photographic record, reflecting developments in the history of photography and the history of British Columbia. Enthusiasm for collecting *cartes-de-visite* and stereographs was waning, larger format "cabinet" photographs were gaining popularity, and the wet-plate era was drawing to a close with continued efforts to preserve the sensitivity of collodion emulsions. The British Columbia frontier of the early Seventies was a political one, not particularly photogenic. But the conditions of Confederation paved the way for developments that would provide an immeasurable boost to the growth of the economy and the photographic record of the province.

From surveying to completion, few facets of the coming of the railways to late nineteenth-century British Columbia escaped the camera's eye. Like the gold rushes two decades before, the CPR captured the popular imagination. Images of the railroad appealed to a public captivated by technological advance, material progress, train travel, engineering feats, picturesque landscapes and Man's mastery over Nature. Like the Cariboo wagon road, the railway gave the photographer access to new scenery, piqued the interest of his buying public and created new subjects for his camera. Professional photographers were quick to recognize this lucrative new market opportunity and railway officials, aware of the selling power of visual impressions, lost no time incorporating photography into their promotional campaigns.

By the time the last spike was driven, advances in photographic technology had reduced the cumbrousness of the equipment and the length of exposure. Cameras were still large, tripods were still required and heavy glass plates still had to be carted from place to place, but factory-prepared gelatin dry-plates at last freed the peripatetic photographer from the fetters of his darkroom and chemicals. Government, company and freelance photographers travelled along the railway line, recording tunnels, trestles, snow-sheds, new towns, whistle-stops, railway hotels and mountain scenery, adding hundreds and hundreds of views to the province's photographic record.

Taking up where Birrell's discussion of Horetzky's CPR survey photography leaves off, Margery Hadley McDougall examines approaches to the creation of visual images of the railway landscape of late nineteenth-century British Columbia. R. H. Trueman was one of the many professional photographers who flocked to the province with the coming of the CPR. Engaged in a freelance business, his success rested upon his sensitivity to the demands of his buying public; accordingly, his work is, in some measure, a mirror of prevailing market taste. That many of the same subjects and symbols appear both in official CPR publicity and in Trueman's photographs attests to the popular enchantment with the romance of train travel and nature. McDougall makes an interesting comparison of his work along the CPR main line with his views of the West Kootenay district, commenting on the relative impact of mountain landscape and human presence.

Trueman's vision extended beyond the railroad and it is from a discussion of his general trade in portraits and views that an opportunity for historical comparison arises. Trueman's work in Sandon, boomtown of the Kootenay silver-lead industry in the 1890s, is reminiscent of Dally's work in Barkerville, boomtown of the Cariboo gold rush thirty years earlier. Photography was no longer a novelty, but rich mines with colourful names, an eager clientele of industrious miners and enterprising businessmen, and a straightforward imagery of townsfolk, street-scenes, mining operations, local events and even a devastating fire were elements common to professional photography on these two British Columbia mining frontiers.

In the wake of the railroad came a land boom that had a profound effect upon the photographic record of the province. Early British Columbians had come in search of fortune, not land. Farming, of course, had accompanied settlement, but it was a sedentary and conservative

pursuit that elicited none of the frontier excitement, romance or challenge of gold mining, logging or railroad construction. Consequently, the early photographic record of agriculture is meagre, limited to views of farmsteads or fields near Victoria or Nanaimo or around the milehouses of the Cariboo Road; many of the scenes are not so much a record of farming as a tribute to individual enterprise. Until the 1880s, farming was secondary to other resource industries — both in economic importance and in popular appeal. It was with the coming of the CPR that new lands and new markets were made accessible and that efforts to promote development began in earnest.

The CPR recognized the need to populate the province and it devoted one facet of its advertising to portraying the railway as a civilizing and colonizing force. Once again, photography played a key role in these and other efforts to “sell” the province. Views of extensive orchards and abundant harvests were more than record images — they were visual arguments. Where the emigrant guides of the 1860s could offer only glowing accounts of colonial life and the occasional wood-block engraving, half-tone technology permitted turn-of-the-century advertising campaigns to publish photographic proof of their enthusiastic descriptions. “‘A Picture of Prosperity’: The British Columbia Interior in Promotional Photography, 1890-1914” looks at the use of photographs in the boosterism of the land boom years. In an examination of illustrations of the Okanagan, Cobb and Duffy address the larger issue of image and reality in photographic depictions of the province and bring together several themes that surface elsewhere in this special issue — the persuasive power of the visual image, the manipulative effect of a selective portrayal, the Victorian faith in photographic truth, the nineteenth-century obsession with material progress and the filtered reality of published illustrations. The photographic record of the pre-war decades attests to the strength and success of the promotional literature of which it was a part.

In the half-century after its introduction into British Columbia, photography was used, among other things, to aid surveying, gather ethnological evidence, celebrate personal success, record historic events, assist artists and engravers, promote tourism and encourage immigration. The large and wide-ranging body of photographs produced by government, commercial and amateur photographers has been the focus of growing attention over the last decade as entrepreneurs have capitalized on the nostalgia craze by putting old photographs on everything from coffee-cans to placemats. Browsing in the “British Columbia” section of most

bookstores, one is assaulted by a barrage of photo-books, illustrated histories, coffee-table volumes, jack-daws and series of pictorial compilations devoted to the people and places of early British Columbia.

Of the spate of profusely illustrated books on early British Columbia that have appeared in the last ten years, some are handsome, lavish publications; others are pleasing yet inexpensive. But, whether ambitious or unassuming efforts, many are no more than a pictorial romp through the province's past. As Davison points out, photographs for illustrating publications are all too often selected with haste and indifference. Such illustrations are then published with equally little respect for quality or informational value. Photographs often have inadequate captions — inserted unattributed, undated or tenuously related to the text — or are indiscriminately cropped to accommodate format or space requirements. Reproduction quality is the first to suffer from budgetary short-cuts in book production; detail and contrast are lost when printing screens or papers are chosen primarily for economic rather than aesthetic considerations. Yet careful attention to selection, interpretation, documentation and reproduction of photographic illustrations can make published pictorial compilations useful and convenient sources of information and enjoyment.

Whereas Davison addresses the misuse of photographs in research, David Mattison looks at their use and abuse in publications. Comparing two or more examples of publications on the work of British Columbia's early photographers, of illustrated urban histories of Vancouver and of photo-books on the province's past, he uncovers some of the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to published photographs. The bibliography that follows, along with "Photographs of British Columbia: Where to Find Them," will provide readers with a greater sense of purpose and direction for the task of researching and utilizing photographic sources.

The essays in this special issue are neither illustrated histories of British Columbia nor histories of photography in the province, though they obviously incorporate elements of both. Rather, they are historical research culled from several fields of study; contributors come from a variety of backgrounds — history, geography, anthropology, fine art, Canadian studies, English and even biology. Some are academics; many are archivists; all share a common respect for the photograph as an historical document. By direction and by example, they offer insights into the interpretation of photographic sources, exploring the technological and conceptual underpinnings peculiar to their creation and drawing conclusions

about the political, social, cultural and economic milieu of which they were a product. Their work represents a new frontier in historical research and writing, both scholarly and popular. This volume of original research presents an interdisciplinary overview of current research employing archival photographs. It is intended to reflect, encourage, strengthen and facilitate the use of photographs as primary sources for studies of early British Columbia.