

Turning a Blind Eye: The Historian's Use of Photographs

J. ROBERT DAVISON

"One picture is worth ten thousand words." Few of us are unfamiliar with the ancient Chinese proverb. Yet, as an archivist charged with the keeping of historical photographs, it has always puzzled me how a student of British Columbia's history will spend days in meticulous study, tracing records, sifting through letters, poring over diaries, analysing documents line by line and word by word. Then almost as an afterthought he will visit the Visual Records Division with a request for "appropriate" photographs, attention still focused steadfastly, of course, on the text. With dozens of photo files spread before him he will scan image after image, peering at this one, discarding that one, nodding at another, like a decorator choosing a paint colour or wallpaper pattern. Finally he will choose something that pleases him, "to illustrate my text." Examination and selection have taken, at most, a few minutes. What would this rigorous investigator do, I wonder, if I told him that the photographs he has blithely chosen to illustrate his painstaking prose might unwittingly make an artful bubble of his every word? And how different might his history have been for him and for his readers if, instead of the traditional approach to historical research, he had chosen to *begin* with the photographs rather than end with them?

My hypothetical researcher is admittedly an extreme example of this sort of "illustrative" user of images in historical writing; nevertheless, he is more typical than atypical of the general researcher. A photograph, we are increasingly told by photo historians, is an historical document in its own right and, like every other historical document, it is meant to be read, all ten thousand words of it, with at least the same care and attention to detail as a letter, a diary, a manuscript or a book — line by line and word by word. Why then do so many books of history (including those popular coffee-table varieties) contain a wealth of photographs that frequently bear little relation to the text they are meant to illustrate? "Whatever is said about [these photographs]," writes photo analyst Dr. Robert Akeret, "usually consists of something like 'From left to right are

...? Okay, we have identified them. But what then? Usually nothing of real interest or significance. But isn't there something more in those photographs; something we may not learn from just reading the text about the people or the situation involved?"¹ Like Dr. Akeret, I think there is a lot.

What accounts for this reluctance on the part of historians and others to exploit the full value of the photograph as record? Is it perhaps because most of us already accept and use the visual image without really understanding it, much as we are now beginning to accept and use the computer without understanding it? If it is true, as some historians have suggested, that the invention of photography is the most important revolution since the invention of writing ("When," asks Paul Theroux, "have we been so privileged to look the past in the eye?"²), then it is also true that most of us today live in a state of visual illiteracy:

I am convinced that most of us are visually illiterate and we miss completely the valuable, rich, documented sources of personal and interpersonal information that is caught and fixed in photographs. Most people rarely look at photos beyond a fleeting glance; they don't linger with these precious records or reexamine the familiar. And they are not attuned, motivated, or disciplined to mine them for what they are worth. And yet, as Oliver Wendell Holmes noted years ago, photographs are like mirrors with memories. They document our personal developmental past, reminding us where we have been and how we have developed. Also, they graphically illustrate for us the attitudes and emotions of people in public life or newsworthy situations whom we will probably never know or see in person.³

The results of such illiteracy are often disturbing discrepancies between the impressions we have from "history" and the realities of the still-living images before us, although they are discrepancies detected usually by only the most perceptive among us.

Ironically enough, this predicament derives in large part from the peculiar power the photograph exerts over us. Until recently, at least, most of us have taken for granted the literal veracity of the photographic image, what has been styled its "mechanical truth."⁴ Because the photograph, unlike a painting, has been created by a mechanical process which

¹ Robert U. Akeret, *Photoanalysis* (New York: Peter H. Wyden, Inc., 1973), p. 141.

² Paul Theroux, "The Past Recaptured," foreword to Margaret Loke, ed., *The World As It Was — A Photographic Portrait — 1865-1921* (New York: Summit Books, 1980), p. 10.

³ Akeret, *Photoanalysis*, p. 4.

⁴ Stanley Milgram, "The Image Freezing Machine," *Psychology Today* 10:8 (January, 1977): 52.

records every visual surface within its purview exhaustively and directly, we attribute to the photograph a high degree of credibility. Objects depicted in a photograph seem more real to us than objects depicted in a painting or some other graphic representation. Seen this way, photographs are taken as proof. "Something we hear about, but doubt," notes Susan Sontag, "seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it. . . . A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture."⁵ We do, in other words, take photographs at their face value.

Proofs they may be, but photographs are hardly ever used as proof wholly unsupported. More often they are used as confirmation. Contrary to popular belief that a photograph can speak for itself, one image can relatively seldom stand on its own as a pristine document for the working historian (though perhaps a hundred might). Historians no less than jurists would be on shaky ground using photographs as evidence in the form of proof. We have become too aware of how easily photographs can be faked or unrepresentative of what they purport to depict. Many photographs are, indeed, violations of historical evidence, leading the viewer to draw conclusions from evidence that the evidence doesn't support. A good example of this is the photograph reproduced here of Fraser River Indians at prayer, taken by Frederick Dally circa 1868 (Plate I). The photograph is in fact a lie, for whatever serious or capricious motives, but fortunately in this instance the photographer has been unwilling to go along with it in his own tagging of the image. Had it not been for Dally's candour, however, a viewer could conceivably read into or take from this photograph much that is not there. The real situation, as can be seen, is much more historically interesting on a variety of levels.

Photographic falsehoods need not be as bold as the Dally photograph. Sometimes they can be subtle and not deliberately misleading at all, even with the open collusion of both photographer and subject. I am thinking here specifically of Edward Curtis' renowned photographs of North American Indian life. Curtis deliberately posed his subjects in a conscious

⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), p. 5. Psychologist Stanley Milgram has pointed out the compelling effect that photographs have on our judgment, and suggests that the power of photographs lies precisely in the difficulty of repudiating them, even if they have captured unrepresentative moments. Politicians and propagandists are well aware of this particular power. The now famous photograph of Robert Stanfield flubbing a football kick-off during a political campaign is just one such example.



PLATE I. *Indians, Fraser River, c. 1868.* Frederick Dally, photographer (83074). Original albumen print in an album of prints assembled by Dally. The caption, in Dally's handwriting, reads "Indians shammy to be at prayer for the sake of photography." Above is written, "At the priests request all the Indians kneel down and assume an attitude of devotion. Amen."

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attempt to record a way of life that in many cases had vanished, or soon would vanish, so in one sense these photographs too are lies insofar as they do not document reality but romanticize a past that had its seamier, unphotographed side. We are able to accept these photographs as truth, all the same, principally because we know their context and respect the integrity of the photographer's motives. They stand, therefore, not as a depiction of a people in any given year but as one admirer describes them — a glimpse of a much remoter past when we may be assured that for many centuries the people looked exactly like this.⁶

Considering the complicated ways in which photographs can be untruthful (e.g., images taken out of context, misrepresented verbally, manipulated by camera tricks, or simply constrained by the technical limitations of the medium), what most criticism of the photograph as historical evidence finally boils down to, it seems to me, is the crucial question of the photographer's integrity. On this point we move from naive acceptance of the photograph's mechanical truth to complete denial of any claims photography might have to objectivity:

The imagery of the decisive moment, the snapshot as document, the portrait as revelation — none of these is in possession of anything that may be called objectivity, for the framed-in composition must, by something like Heisenbergian necessity, constitute neither more nor less than a patently ideological creation. The result of innumerable interpretive and aesthetic decisions, the photograph is always the product of the activity of the photographer. Focused and framed by him, it is selective, refined, and particularized, and the constituents of its image system are always the children of his choice, the stuff of his world. Like Lee Friedlander's famous shadow, the photographer is always in the picture. The photographer may report — no question. And his reportage may document, but no document can be either complete, unbiased, or objective if it derives in any way from a position involving a point-of-view.⁷

⁶ Theroux, "The Past Recaptured," p. 11.

⁷ John Brumfield, "A good milk cow is not a helicopter, and that is a fact," *Photo-Communique* (May/June/July/August 1980), p. 38. In laying emphasis on this argument for the subjective nature of the photographic experience, photographic critic Brumfield has given short shrift, in my opinion, to his preceding argument, perhaps a more valid criticism of the photograph as historical evidence: "Put simply, the issue of accuracy turns on the question of what is true, and . . . *that* question, it seems to me, is not whether or not there may be a 'greater' truth that two-dimensional perception cannot accommodate, but that, whatever the 'truth' is, it does not sit still for the photographer. For, while the charming homily of the five blind Persians and the elephant does, it is true, represent a serious challenge to the premises of reportage, more troublesome is the modernist concept that the 'nature' of reality is characterized by a dynamic of evolutionary change: the contemporary translation of the 15th-century obsession with *mutabilitie* argues not merely that all things pass away, but that everything is always in transformational interaction with something else, nothing is ever still. Boundaries are never stable:

I have little doubt such sentiments are partly to blame for many historians' hesitation to approach photographs as primary sources of information. Yet it is hard to find anything either astutely new in these criticisms or which cannot be applied with equal validity to other historical documents. What document, after all, does not derive in some manner from a point of view which must be understood, at the very least acknowledged, in order to be correctly interpreted?

The contesting claims of photographic critics and apologists are part of the continuing debate over photography's identity begun at its birth in the last century — is photography science or art? From the historian's standpoint the question should be irrelevant. As Sontag among others has rightly surmised, "the conflict of interest between objectivity and subjectivity, between demonstration and supposition, is unresolvable."⁸ All the historian need recognize is that those who emphasize the subjectivity of seeing in photography, that is, where the integrity of the photographer becomes more important than *what* is in the photograph, will always judge photographs using essentially artistic criteria. Such judgments both confound and undermine the authority of the photograph as historical evidence, reducing it to illustration. That authority rests with the peculiar power of the photograph spoken of earlier, namely, that it is above all a photograph *of* something.

In photography the subject always asserts itself. Intention, whether of the photographer or of the subject, is not a good guide to the nature of a photographic image. This has been demonstrated independently by photo historians and psychologists. There is a sense in which photographs do capture reality, not just interpret it, although it is not the simplistic sense of that aforementioned mechanical truth. Photographs can be more than just studies in the possibilities of the camera or the personal visions of the person behind the camera. To appreciate this we must see past the distorting effects of manipulation by photographer or subject, what historian Alan Thomas has called Arrangement, to examine an image's

there can be no such thing as an independent existence nor an autonomous identity, and, from the point-of-view of the historian, the march of significant events is hardly a march at all, and it is certainly not linear. The idea of the 'historical integrity' of an action or a moment — the launching of Sputnik, the discovery of America, or the murder of Marat — such concepts are virtually meaningless. And the descriptive accuracy of the self-contained photograph? Admissible in court, perhaps, but tentatively, the way one admits — for the sake of focusing an argument — an embarrassingly oversimplified distortion." Sontag puts it succinctly: "Life is not about significant details, illuminated a flash, fixed forever. Photographs are."

⁸ Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 135.

internal evidence, its reality or what Thomas calls its unassailable Actuality.⁹ We must go beyond the surface to seek the substance. When we do so we may often find that a photograph has an underlying message that runs counter to the appearance its makers have given it. In some cases, this Actuality succeeds in completely overturning Arrangement. The photograph then becomes a potent spring of information.

Re-examine the Dally photograph described earlier. We can see that we really do not need Dally's captions to detect the sham. It is abundantly obvious in individual faces and gestures. The two priests have set a fine, holy example, but their spiritual and physical distance from the group is palpable: they are easily picked out standing (here, kneeling) apart — curiously not aloof, for in this case it is the native group that is aloof. They have gone along with the play, but there is little conviction. Some emulate the priests, but only tentatively, as if they were unsure of what exactly constitutes an “attitude of devotion.” A few others seem to have thought it barely worth the effort. They have pulled their dignity and their pride around them like their blankets, refusing the pious assault on their spirit.

This same subtle refusal is evident in many photographs of native peoples taken in the last century and this one. Look, for example, at the photograph of Fort Rupert Indians included in the annual report of the Department of Indian Affairs for 1901 (Plate II). Decades after the Dally photograph, we see in the bizarre mixture of clothing and artifacts how far the steady incursion of European culture into native life has gone. Still it is possible to detect that same indomitable spirit written on individual faces. The man and boy fourth and fifth from the left in the back row, for instance, have crossed their arms in the characteristic gesture of closure, self-containment and denial. There remains unmistakably something in these people that refuses to wholly accept the alien culture thrust upon them, despite the outward manifestations of it. Much has been made in recent years, by white and Indian leaders alike, of the withering of the native spirit under white cultural domination. It is hard to find evidence of it in a great many historical photographs. Actuality undermines Arrangement.

In other cases, Actuality betrays Arrangement. Photographs of people, especially portrait photographs, are generally the most obvious products of stage direction; consequently, in terms of revelations about underlying realities, their capacity to conceal rather than reveal has been noted.

⁹ Alan Thomas, *The Expanding Eye: Photography and the Nineteenth-Century Mind* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978), p. 48.



PLATE II. *Group of Indians belonging to the Kwawkwalth Agency, Fort Rupert, B.C. (68241). Copied from the Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs, 1901. A confrontation of cultures and conflicting realities.*

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What nevertheless becomes apparent is that photographic stagecraft is the product of a social relationship between photographer and subject. Even the environmental props with which an individual surrounds himself, together with the manner in which those props are structured, is the result of a collaboration, conscious or unconscious, between photographer and subject. Understandably, the values and attitudes inherent in photographic codes and conventions turn out to be fairly accurate reflections of the values and attitudes of the society they picture. The portrait photograph, hence, is invaluable as a social document. This accounts for photo historian Thomas' conclusion that "portraiture, strangely enough, has more to do with the expression of general ideas than particulars."¹⁰

On the other hand, psychologists have lately speculated that we may be able to go further in extracting information from photographs by paying closer attention to particulars. Every detail in a photograph, they maintain, arranged or not, may have more significance than meets the eye. Facial expression, the way one sits or walks, gesture, the objects with which one surrounds oneself as well as linkage to those objects, even the decision where to stand in a photograph are all clues to an individual's self-image and, by extension, to a larger set of values. True, the pose may be a clever artifice, "but even people trying to look their best must work with the materials at their disposal and under conscious control; close scrutiny of the inadvertent gesture, the unintended clue, or biologically ineradicable detail often adds another level of meaning to the photograph."¹¹ If life forces on us the need to choose, it has been said, then photography forces on us the need to pose. One psychologist believes that studying how those poses change over time in different social classes, in different cultures and through an individual's lifetime is a "first-class problem for research."¹²

Consider the portraits here of Sir James Douglas (Plate III) and Dave Barrett (Plate IV), rather typical examples of formal pictures meant for public consumption. Supposing a historian knew only that these were photographs of the political leaders of British Columbia a century apart. Even to an unpractised observer it should be clear that something astounding has happened in the short space of one hundred

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94. "...the vast number of Victorian portrait photographs," writes Thomas, "are best read as social documents; again and again it is not the portraitist's art but the cultural meaning which, along with historical detail, gives interest to the photograph."

¹¹ Milgram, "Image Freezing Machine," p. 108.

¹² *Ibid.* Needless to say, historians might well ask themselves whether or not this same problem has significance for them.



PLATE III. *Portrait of Sir James Douglas, Governor of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, c. 1872.* Hannah Maynard, photographer (2653).

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PLATE IV. *Honourable David Barrett, Premier of British Columbia, August, 1972* (81183). The photograph has greater effect in its original colour format, with its rainbow-hued background.

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years. Questions spring to mind. Can the same society, the same political system really have produced these two startlingly different men? What accounts for the radical change that has apparently taken place in the nature of political leadership? What do these pictures mean in terms of how political leaders in this society regard themselves, and wish to be regarded by others? What has happened to the attitudes and expectations people in this society hold toward their political leaders? Has the change been abrupt or gradual? Might we, for instance, be able to pin it down by examining a range of similar portraits of intervening leaders, say, every decade? How do these changes relate to the larger society — similarities? differences? faster? slower? My point is not to imply that questions like these can be answered merely by examining photographs. What amazes me is that they are almost never asked in the context of photographs, where historical insights can spring forth directly, concisely and dramatically. We don't use photographs as the unique springboards to historical research they can be. We have not learned to look at them and ask questions, so we look but we don't see. Like my diligent researcher earlier, we do not know how to read photographs.

One cannot hope to "read" a photograph in the same way as one reads a book — that much should have been guessed by now. A different set of mental skills is called for. The photographer, Minor White, has recommended a disciplined observation that requires the viewer to use only the information in the image itself, and aims at understanding rather than evaluation. First (and foremost), the viewer asks what is the subject of the photograph. This means temporarily putting aside the *way* a photographer sees a subject in favour of *what* he sees. The viewer next asks what is the attitude or bias of the photographer toward his subject. The photographer's frame of reference must be taken into account to gain an understanding of how the subject is seen. A corollary to this, thirdly, is what is the photographer's attitude toward the viewer. Images are designed to trigger certain responses in the observer, although the actual response may be determined by quite different criteria than those intended by either photographer or subject. Using the clues obtained from these questions, finally, the viewer is in a position to make an assumption about the meaning of a photograph.¹³ Each photograph has a complex structure of meanings, according to White, specific rather than traditional. Possible interpretations open to the viewer are extensive and insightful, though in no way easily arrived at. Chiefly, the skills needed

¹³ Minor White cited in Elizabeth Heyert, *The Glass House Years: Victorian Portrait Photography 1839-1870* (Montclair: Allanheld & Schram, 1979), pp. 73-74.

are a willingness to observe keenly and to refine visual perceptions by contemplating an image's underlying meanings.

To illustrate what it is possible to learn from a photograph using only the information supplied by the image itself, let me choose a simple example. The interpretations that follow are my own personal ones, and others are possible, indeed, invited. What I mean to suggest here is how photographs can be explored when seen as a collaboration between the photographer, the subject and the viewer. Look closely at the two photographs of family groups that follow (Plates V and VI). Both are family portraits typical of the kind that have come down to us from the last century, very likely similar to many found in family collections. On the face of it, there is nothing very remarkable about either of these pictures, though they are interesting. Now look more closely at the first picture. What does this photograph tell us?

When I first saw this photograph, I had no background information at all about its content, who these people were, or what relationships existed between them, apart from the reasonable assumption that this was a family. All the same, it is possible to know a great deal about these people. To begin with, their clothing tells me that this picture was taken either in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Though well dressed, the plainness and lack of ostentation in attire and background leads me to believe that the family was comfortable but not affluent, perhaps working or lower middle class. It is a large group. There are more children here than we are likely to find in today's population-conscious families, revealing an older, traditional attitude towards family size. We will see, if we look carefully, that there are two sets of twins in this picture, the four girls at the "corners" of the group identically dressed. The overall impression is a pleasing one: everyone appears to be relaxed and at ease, pleasant if not actually smiling.

What is most fascinating about this photograph is the curious symmetry that has been established. Note how each member of the family has been placed in relation to the whole. The three rows are carefully balanced, top to bottom, left to right, male to female, old to young. In the back row is the central figure of father, head of the family, with the only other male of the group at his side, a position fitting and proper for the son and heir. The men are flanked on either side by eldest twin daughters. In the second row are the mother on the right, and another woman, who might be an older daughter or younger sister, on the left, with the middle daughter between them in the very centre. Continuing the descending order of age, in the third row are the youngest child of all in



PLATE V. *Family photograph, Comox, B.C., 1906.* Walter Gage, photographer (93094). A plainness more eloquent than style.

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the central position and the youngest set of twins off to each side, completing the “box,” all perfectly proportioned. One might easily be tempted to attribute this arrangement to a simple piece of whimsy on the part of the photographer who posed the picture, but other things lead me to believe there is more here than a photographer’s clever gimmick.

The strongest impression I have of this family group as a whole is its special kind of solidarity. The degree of supportive and protective cohesion is remarkable. Mark especially the placement of bodies and hands, how every member in this family is linked to every other by touch. Note, too, how many supportive/protective groupings can be seen — older children and parents on the edges around younger, more vulnerable children in the centres, or one adult in the midst of every group of children. The position of the young woman on the left seems to me worth observing in this regard. She enjoys virtually an equal status with the mother, yet see how she has the reassuring support of both father and one twin behind her. Look, as well, with what unselfconscious ease the middle daughter drapes her arm casually over her mother’s shoulder. In front of her, meantime, the baby of the family seems almost to imitate her mother’s seated pose, as to a degree the son emulates his father. The gaze in this family is steady and uniform. There is really no one central figure who stands out to dominate; rather, an equality is suggested, emanating from an order in which every member has his special place, drawing support and strength from the unity of the whole. It is not possible to remove any one person from this picture without throwing the whole off balance. Evidently, this is a very close-knit family.

I later learned that this is the family of Michael Manson, pioneer, Cortes Island trader, and eventually (1909) member of the British Columbia Legislature until his death in 1932. His papers are held in the Provincial Archives in Victoria. Michael Manson eloped with his bride, Jane Renwick of Nanaimo, who had been abused and beaten by her father. The couple made their way by Indian canoe to Victoria, where they were married in 1878. The early years of their marriage were trying and heart-rending: they lost their first-born from illness in 1881; in 1890, diphtheria claimed four children within a month. Only one child, Margaret, survived — the young woman in the photograph whose special status now stands explained. Seven children were born in later years, including the two sets of twins, and this is the family we see in the portrait, taken about 1906. Reading Manson’s own words and the accounts of those who knew the family, we gather that, as the photo reveals, the Mansons were a close, loving and devoted family.

It is immediately obvious to us that the family depicted in the second portrait (Plate VI) presents a stark contrast to the Mansons. Lifestyle, attitudes and interpersonal relationships caught in this image bespeak an altogether dissimilar family dynamic at work. A number of differences can be readily observed. For instance, the group is smaller, with only half as many children. Whereas elaborate trappings are missing from the Mansons' simple backdrop and plain dress, the clothing here is fashionable and well-tailored, the background is ornate and crammed with detail, and the pose has been characteristically formalized as in a painting. The Manson picture could conceivably have been taken by Uncle John in the parlour, but this second portrait is unmistakably the work of a professional. All suggests self-conscious affluence.

From beneath the surface more profound differences arise. There is little group-feeling and little detectable contact, physical or otherwise, between family members in this photo. It is a series of individual portraits, each of which could easily stand on its own without relation to others. The impressions created, particularly by the men, are those of uncompromising individuality and, might we also say, detachment. Although this family no doubt exhibits a solidarity of its own ("solidity" seems the more appropriate expression), it certainly does not stem, as with the Mansons, from outward affection. Every person in this picture is a wholly separate and unique individual, with a highly developed sense of personal distance and a well-established awareness of roles.

In place of the Mansons' close protecting "box" we have a line, or perhaps a pyramid, with parents firmly in the centre and children on the peripheries. Father is formally seated with his papers in a very substantial-looking chair, one foot decorously poised on a foot-cushion. The conquering monarch on his throne? Perhaps more than coincidentally, the picture brings to mind royal family portraits. Behind father, mother poses dutifully at her husband's shoulder, the one standing figure, and in my opinion the only softening influence among these stern bourgeoisie. As wife and mother, this role was permitted her, even expected, and certainly we feel this relief would have been needed. At the extreme left, the eldest daughter sits apart with violin and bow, indicating the value placed on musical pursuits and cultural development for the women of the family. These qualities may have been looked upon as assets enhancing the eligibility of a future bride, or they may simply have reflected the great importance I suspect this family placed on personal achievement. The eldest son, seated next to his father, seems to come closest to emulating his father's pose; nevertheless, his individuality is maintained. The



PLATE VI. *Formal family portrait, c. 1897.* John Savannah, photographer (54816). From the Mrs. Alexander Gillespie Collection. People used as props in an elaborate stage setting.

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responsibility assigned to him as eldest is clear from his proximity to the key central pair. The youngest girl, on her father's left, adopts an almost wistful pose, at once girlish but somewhat too worldly. It's an actress' gesture. Her brother, at the extreme right of the group, strikes a posture that strongly recalls to my memory portraits I have seen of Victorian illuminati. Here we have one kind of the archetypal "gentleman" — studied sophistication, a slight touch of cynicism and a wry look approaching disdain.

It is interesting that in addition to the consciousness of individual roles these people seem to project, I detect, besides, a pronounced feeling of the distinction between "masculine" and "feminine" roles. Might this partially account for the significance in the fact that the orientation and gaze of all the women in this photo is directed into the camera, while that of the men is directed uniformly right of centre?

What we know of these people, the Jacob Hunter Todd family, tends to bear out what we have learned from their portrait. J. H. Todd came to British Columbia in 1862 from the farmlands of Brampton, Ontario, drawn by the prospect of fortune in the Cariboo gold fields. He found no fortune in gold, but his great drive and ambition forged for him within a few years the beginnings of what became a modest business and financial empire, J. H. Todd & Sons, Ltd., the name behind mining ventures and Horseshoe brand canned salmon. The firm was well known to British Columbians for its shrewd dealings and strict business practices. Todd's wife, Anna Fox, died after only a few short years of marriage, leaving him two surviving children, the eldest of whom, Charles Fox Todd, became his father's astute business partner. Following a brief visit to his old home in Ontario in 1872, Todd returned to Victoria with a new wife, Rosanna Wigley, a Brampton schoolteacher. She bore him his second family, two sons and two daughters, whom we see in the Todd portrait.

Later photographs show that the two girls, Mary Anne (Mai) and Rose Ellen (Nellie) were their mother's constant companions during their childhood, and the former schoolteacher undeniably had a hand in their education. After her husband's death in 1899, Rosanna Todd accompanied her daughters to Dresden in Germany where they went to school. Mai Todd married John Hebden Gillespie, son of another well-known Victoria business family, and became active in Victoria's cultural and musical circles. As her picture hints, she was an accomplished violinist. Her sister, Nellie, married John's brother, Alexander Gillespie, noted Victoria businessman and sportsman, and became the grandmother of B.C.'s one-time Liberal leader and Victoria MP, David Anderson. It is

largely to Nellie that we owe the collection of Todd family materials in the Archives. The eldest son in the portrait, John L. Todd, followed his destiny to become an eminent doctor. Educated at Upper Canada College and McGill University, he led medical expeditions to West Africa researching tropical diseases, and over his long distinguished career he earned a string of prestigious directorships, medals, awards and honours. Albert E. Todd, the young patrician of the picture, joined his father and half-brother in the family business. A founder and leading member of the Victoria Board of Trade, he ultimately became mayor of the city, initiating some of the area's finest public works. J. H. Todd himself became active in B.C. politics before his death.

Comparison of the Manson and Todd family portraits is an example of only one of the ways in which a wealth of information can be extracted from old photographs. With careful perception and imagination, and access to a greater number of similar photographs with some background information, one could draw many more conclusions than I have attempted to do in this brief demonstration. There are naturally dangers. The language of the visual image is a highly personal form of communication, depending for its meaning to a far greater extent than the uttered word on the subjective and cultural viewpoint of the person reading it. Interpretation of the same image by different people in different cultures in different times will tell us as much about the observer as the observed. This will be true whether we are looking at photographs or ink-blots. The fact remains, nonetheless, that despite our familiarity with visual experience we are still unaccustomed to search for the meanings in the visual imagery that surrounds us. If we did, the effort might shed an entirely new light on old information.

That is what seems to me the real potential of historical photographs for researchers and historians, their ability to amplify our knowledge of the past — amplification, which is more than illustration and less than proof. Photographs are powerfully evocative. At the verbal level we learn much, but photographs can penetrate directly into that ineffable region beyond the uttered word where we feel and experience as much as think. Captured within the “mirror with a memory” is frequently a faithful reflection of the individual and interpersonal dynamics of an entire society, focused intensely into one visual image no bigger than a postcard. Photographs are also extremely seductive. Arousing our curiosity about worlds at a cultural and temporal remove, and fascinating us with the incongruities between Actual and Arranged, photographs encourage us to read closely and re-examine facts outside the image in order to find an ex-

planation.¹⁴ What photographs do best, I must agree with Theroux and Sontag, is to suggest imagination by dealing with the actual; to say: “There is the surface. Now think — or rather feel, intuit — what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way.”¹⁵ And always, whether we are looking at the photograph of a person, a group of people, a scenic view or an inanimate object, the key to unlocking its store of information is the same — observation (Plates VII to IX).

¹⁴ Thomas, *Expanding Eye*, p. 48. For a good example of the use of photographs as a starting place for historical research and writing, I recommend Colin Gordon’s recent book, *A Richer Dust: Echoes from an Edwardian Album* (Philadelphia and New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1978), wherein a fortuitous discovery by the author of a collection of old glass negatives in a junk shop led to the unfolding of the story of an Edwardian bourgeois family and the milieu of its time. The title of the book is taken from Rupert Brooke’s war sonnet, “The Soldier,” and could well apply to the current status of historical photographs in the world of historical scholarship:

... There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed.

¹⁵ Theroux, “Past Recaptured,” p. 9, and Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 23.



PLATE VII. *Lee Mong Kow family, Victoria, 1911.* George Larrigan, photographer (94186). After having read the text descriptions of the previous two family portraits, try looking at this one in the same way and ask similar questions. What do the differences mean culturally and socially? Note again the mixture of cultures — how does it compare with that depicted in the photo of Fort Rupert Indians, and what does it imply? Significant decisions have been made.



PLATE VIII. *Wedding of Mary Ann (Mai) Todd and John Hebden Gillespie, November 1905.* John Savannah, photographer (54122). The bride's sister Rose Ellen (Nellie) is standing to the far right beside her future husband, Alexander Gillespie, brother of the groom. Seated in front of him is Mrs. J. H. Todd. In the back row, the man immediately behind the bride is Albert Edward Todd. This is another example of a formalized portrait, public face and public emotions carefully controlled. This is a fairy-tale wedding, down to the elegant costuming and stylish setting. No element of uncomfortable reality has been allowed in. COURTESY OF THE PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

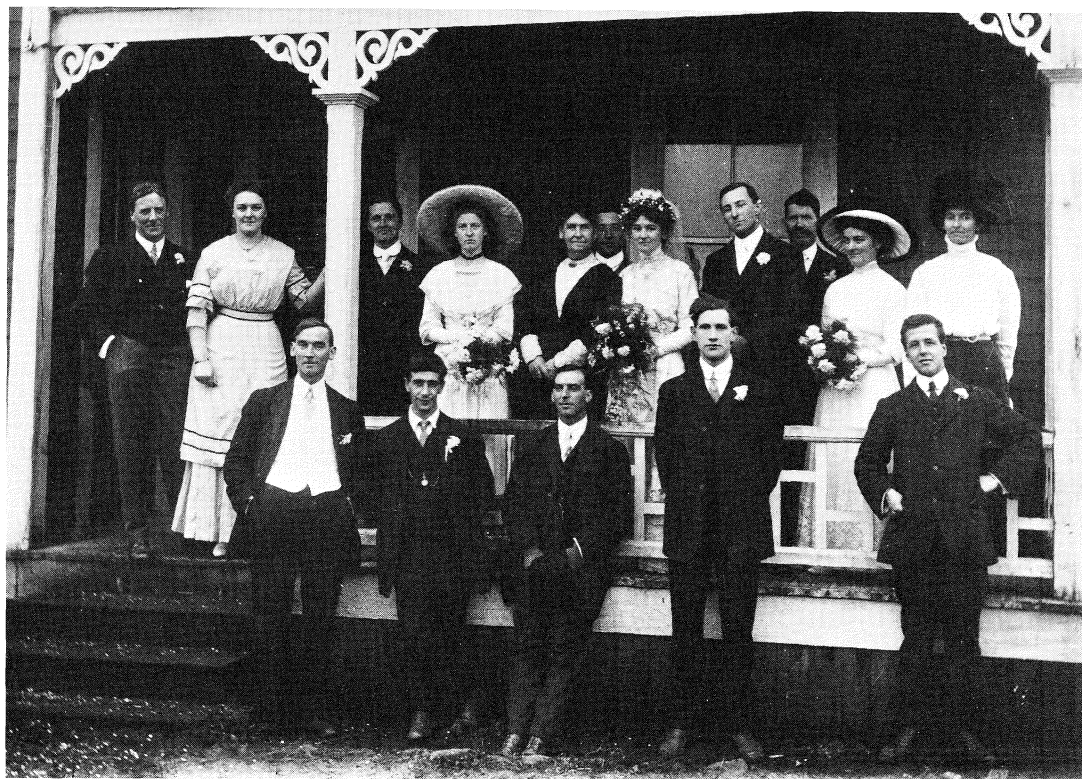


PLATE IX. *Comox wedding group, c. 1910.* Walter Gage, photographer (95184). From the Gage Collection. Contrast this photograph with that of the Gillespie-Todd wedding and ask what it tells us in terms of differing social background. There is, for one thing, an obvious disparity in the degree of control exercised by both the photographer and his subjects. Note, too, the way these people have been positioned, or have positioned themselves, gesture, facial expression, details of clothing, etc. There is undoubtedly an attempt at emulation of the Todd kind of stylishness for the sake of the occasion, but here reality has crept into the picture in subtle ways. On the one hand these people seem more at ease, yet look closely at the men in this picture and their hands. Keep in mind that they are coal miners.

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