

A Visual Cliché: Five Views of Yale

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Yale was firmly fixed in the nineteenth-century British Columbia psyche as a place of note, and it sustained this reputation despite rising and falling economic fortunes. Its fate was inextricably tied to its location — first at the head of steamboat navigation on the lower Fraser, later on the wagon road to the Interior and then on the transcontinental railway. Yale was the place from which distances were measured and unfamiliar locations put into geographical perspective. The bluffs and milehouses of the wagon road and later the tracks and trestles of the railway were invariably identified “between Yale and . . .” or “. . . miles from Yale.” As Hudson’s Bay Company fort, gold rush community, service town, supply depot, trans-shipment point, surveying headquarters and railroad construction centre, it continually commanded attention as a place that was or had been “interesting” or “important” or “remarkable” in some way.

Equally entrenched in the British Columbia consciousness was a visual image of Yale. Among the many scenes both general and particular produced by artists, photographers and engravers, one view came to epitomize the town. A curve in the river just downstream from the settlement afforded a convenient and unobstructed vantage point from which at least a dozen renderings of Yale were made in the half-century after British Columbia became a colony in 1858. Five of these have been chosen for a closer look at the assumptions and constraints that affected the creation, dissemination and ultimately the interpretation of this image of Yale.

At first glance, all five images seem very similar, a circumstance which becomes all the more remarkable considering that, together, they cover a span of twenty years and three different media — painting, photography and engraving. But their homogeneity, achieved despite the number of hands at work, does not necessarily imply similarity of purpose or audience. The first was created for a largely local buying public, the second for those members of the British Empire who subscribed to the *Illustrated*

London News, the third for a limited but travelling tourist audience which bought photo albums and individual pictures as we may buy post-cards today, the fourth for eastern Canadians who patronized the Montreal-based *Canadian Illustrated News*, and the fifth for a patriotic and artistically inclined market prepared to purchase the lavish volumes of *Picturesque Canada*. Neither does the similarity of images reflect the history of Yale, from prosperity through decline to rejuvenation; its changing fortunes seem hardly perceptible in these visual portrayals.

One of the first professional painters to sketch the famous frontier town with the picturesque mountain setting was Frederick Whympier. Like many other gentleman-adventurers, Whympier was drawn to British Columbia by the excitement of the gold rush to the Cariboo. The son of Josiah Wood Whympier, a successful English illustrator and watercolourist, and brother of well-known Alpine painter and engraver, Edward Whympier, Frederick brought with him the conventions of nineteenth-century landscape art. An active member of the Victoria art scene, which included such other professionals as Edmund Coleman, William G. R. Hind and Edward M. Richardson, Whympier served a colonial public composed of government officials and educated settlers who had come to British Columbia cherishing those trappings of middle-class life most easily transplanted to their new home; genteel art was part of their intellectual baggage.

Whympier arrived in Victoria in the fall of 1862 and, the following spring, set off on a sketching excursion to the new mining centres of the Cariboo. He made sketches at Yale, Boston Bar, Nicaragua Slide, Pavilion Mountain, Quesnel Forks, Richfield and Williams Creek, and produced sketches on commission for claim-holders and mining companies. Late in 1863, when Whympier returned to Victoria, the following notice appeared in the *Daily British Colonist*:

FINE ARTS. — Mr. F. Whympier has shown us some very neat water-color sketches of scenes in Cariboo and along the wagon road, taken by him during the past season. We understand he intends taking them to England, when they will probably be given to the public. Mr. W. will be glad to supply copies of the sketches to any parties wishing to procure them.¹

This newspaper announcement sheds some light on why and how Whympier produced his watercolour of Yale, and is revealing on three counts. First, it exemplifies the practice, particularly popular among professional photographers in Victoria throughout the 1860s, of showing

¹ *Daily British Colonist*, 1 December 1863, p. 3, col. 2.

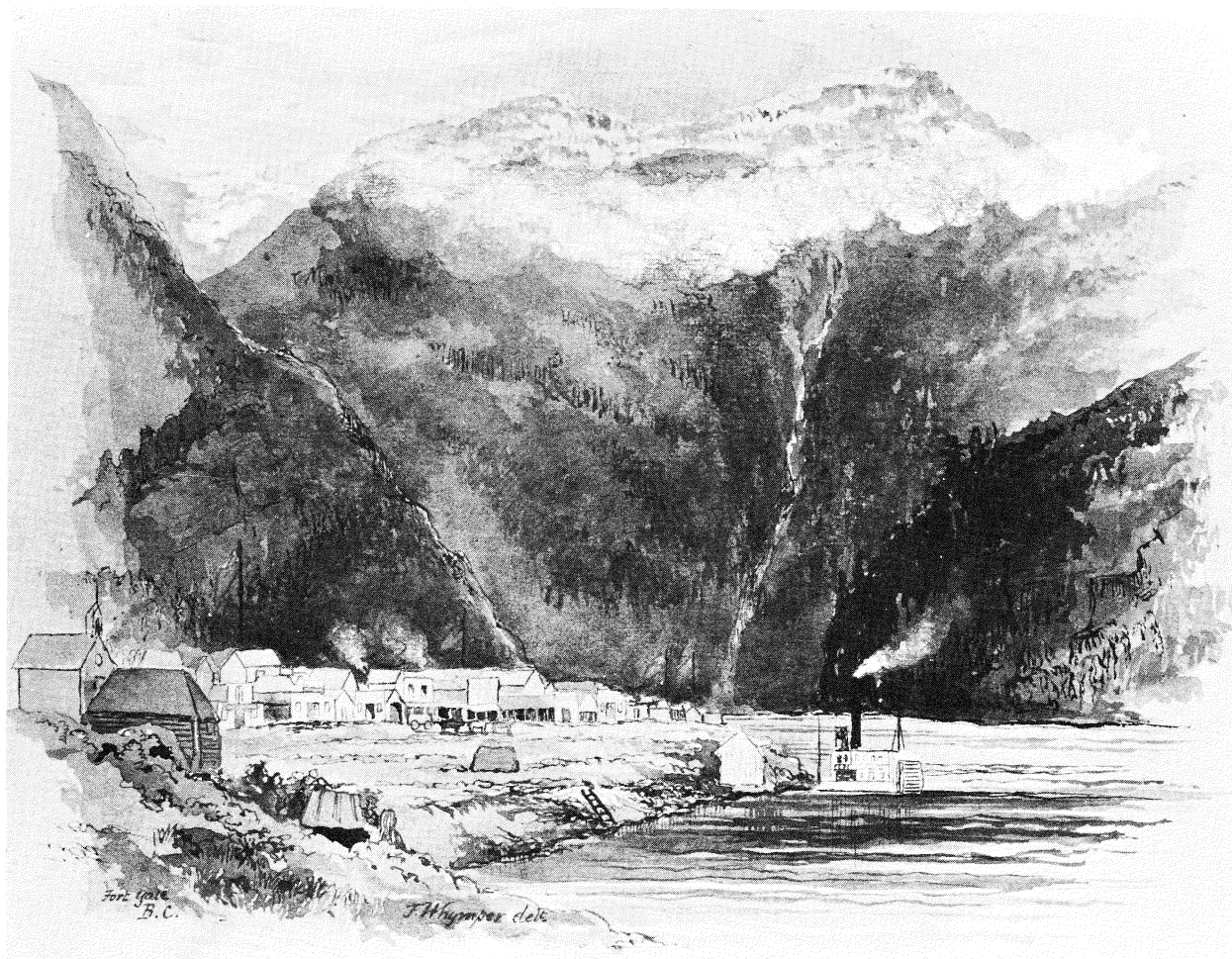


PLATE I. *Fort Yale, B.C.*, by Frederick Whymper, [1863], watercolour and ink (C-1573).

COURTESY OF THE PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA

work to the editors of the local newspaper in the hope of receiving free and favourable publicity. Second, it reveals that Whympier intended his sketches not only for local sale, but also for the British home market. Accordingly, we may presume that he selected and portrayed British Columbia scenery to appeal to two audiences — one wanting a record of familiar places and another eager for views of distant Imperial possessions. Because they shared a common artistic heritage Whympier was able to satisfy both by adhering to the stylistic and compositional dictates of prevailing topographical and Romantic painting traditions. Third, and most important, the newspaper notice demonstrates the practice of using on-the-spot pencil sketches as the basis for watercolour copies, produced and sold to patrons on demand. Like the peripatetic photographer who returned from an outing with a collection of negatives, displayed sample prints in his studio and accepted orders for copies, Whympier produced watercolour views, individually or in sets, from the master sketches he completed on his Cariboo excursion. Among his patrons Whympier boasted Lord Milton, Matthew Baillie Begbie, Rev. Sheepshanks and other prominent public figures. *Fort Yale, B.C.*, two copies of which are known to survive, exemplifies this aspect of nineteenth-century expeditionary or documentary painting. In this respect, Whympier's work may be viewed as a precursor of the work of itinerant photographers of early British Columbia — among them Francis Claudet and Frederick Dally.

Francis Claudet settled in New Westminster in 1860 as the newly appointed Chief Assayer of British Columbia. He was the youngest son of A. F. J. Claudet, the noted London daguerreotypist. Impressed with the scenery of his new home, Francis, an amateur photographer who had undoubtedly learned the process from his father, had his photographic apparatus shipped to New Westminster, where he produced a series of views that received honourable mention at the International Exhibition of 1862.² In May 1866, the *Illustrated London News* published two engravings — *Wire Suspension-Bridge Over The Fraser River, British Columbia* and *Town of Yale, British Columbia* (Plate II) — both from photographs by Claudet.³ Because Claudet was more an amateur than a professional photographer, his view of Yale was not widely distributed in photographic form, but, as an engraving in the most famous of illustrated weeklies, it received attention world-wide.

It is not known whether the photographs used as the basis for the engravings were submitted to the *News* by Claudet himself. An informa-

² *Ibid.*, 19 September 1862, p. 3, col. 2.

³ *Illustrated London News*, 12 May 1866, p. 465.

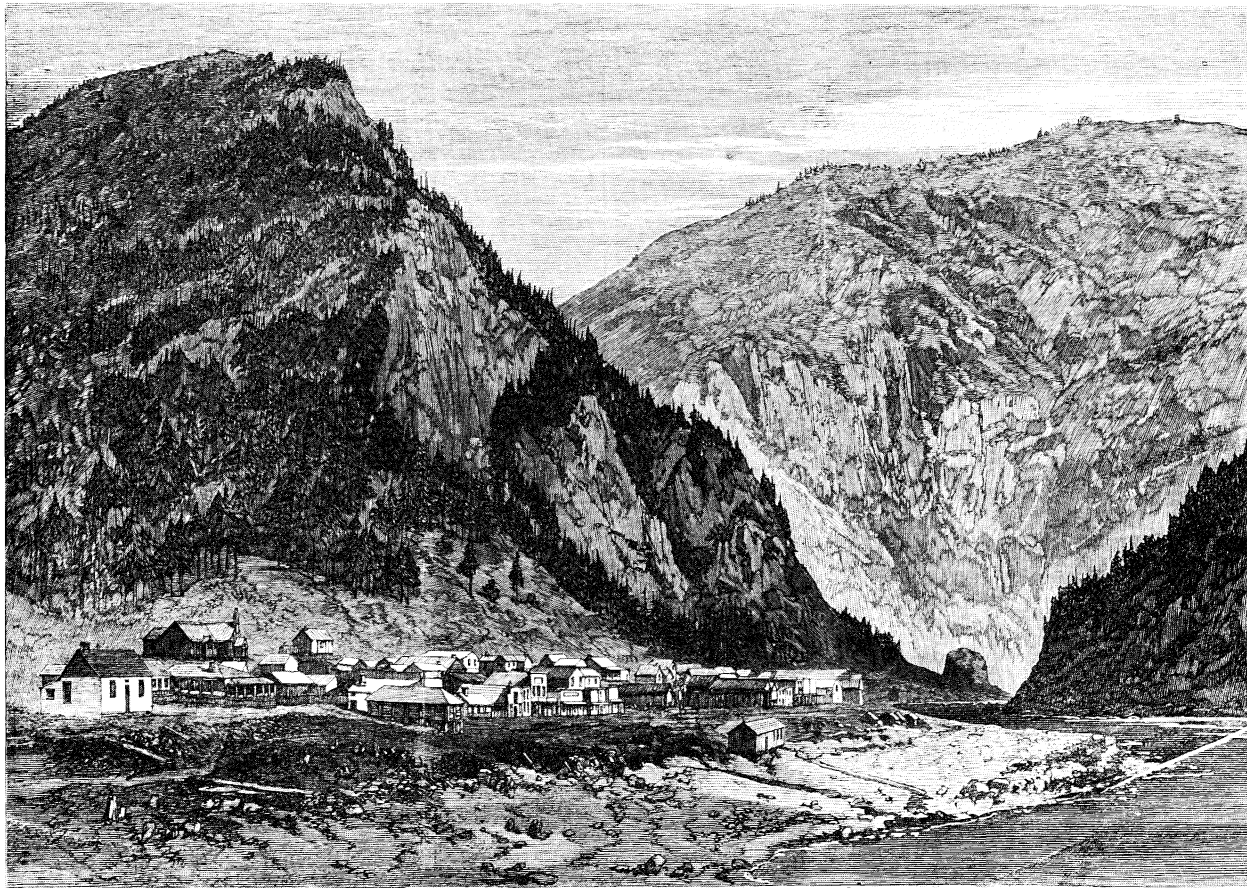


PLATE II. *Town of Yale, British Columbia*, engraved from a photograph by Francis G. Claudet; published in the *Illustrated London News*, 12 May 1866, p. 465 (c-2723b).

COURTESY OF THE PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA

tive article which accompanied the engravings suggests that he supplied the editors with both views and explanatory notes. This is hardly surprising, for Claudet's government position and family background link him with a class which subscribed to the *Illustrated London News*, the periodical which satisfied a curious Victorian public with news and views of exotic places, strange peoples and exciting events throughout the Empire and around the world. It may well have been with the notion of publication in the pictorial press that Claudet carried his equipment on a visit to the Interior and produced a series of views of the settlements and scenery along the route to the gold fields of the upper country.

From the publisher's perspective, the town view alone might have warranted publication simply because Yale was one of the places that elicited the excitement of the British Columbia gold rush and because the aesthetic merits of the landscape had popular appeal. However, accompanied by a succinct description of Yale's economic development and physical location that provided a context for Claudet's photograph of Yale, the view satisfied a variety of nineteenth-century interests and left the reader with the unmistakable impression that here was an important visual record of an historically significant place.

The descriptive text, "Fraser River, British Columbia,"⁴ began with the acknowledgement that the view had been engraved from a photograph by "Mr. F. G. Claudet, superintendent of the Government Assay Office, at New Westminster — a relative of Mr. Claudet, the eminent photographic artist, of Regent-street." Who could doubt the veracity of an engraving made from a photograph, especially one taken by a relative of one of England's most distinguished photographers? The article then conjured up the lore of the fur-trade era when, it was reported, the log house in the foreground of the view formed the original nucleus of the town, serving as both store and fort "occupied by the agents of the Hudson's Bay Company amidst roving Indian tribes." It was then noted that "this relic of British Columbian history" had been removed since the photograph was taken and "the business of the company transferred to a handsome building in the modern style." Such was the march of progress. Further news that in the centre of town some burnt-out houses, destroyed shortly before Claudet's visit, had since been replaced by newer structures provided concrete evidence of the town's development. The reader's attention was then drawn to Yale's "rather picturesque" situation at the point where "the Fraser emerges to enter a wider channel and a

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

more level country, after having coursed for hundreds of miles through mountains and cliffs.” The scene was not only picturesque, but geographically significant; the broad sweep of the river emerging from the narrow defile in the distance invites one to imagine the tortuous course upstream and the placid flow from this point to the sea. Finally discussed was Yale’s role as headquarters for placer mining in the late 1850s and its rapid decline with the discovery of coarse gold farther up-country. Indians, progress, landscape and gold — all popular themes — were brought together in this description accompanying the engraving of the town of Yale.

While engravings were capable of disseminating pictorial information to a large and widely dispersed audience, the local demand for visual images was most readily and cheaply satisfied by the work of the professional photographer. Of the many commercial photographers who arrived in British Columbia during the gold rushes, at least four ventured from their studios in Victoria into the Interior, passing through Yale in the mid-1860s. Christopher Fulton visited Yale in August 1862 and again in May 1863, but no views of the town, if indeed he took any, are known to exist. Charles Gentile arrived in town in October 1865 on a tour of the upper country; he took his own version of the now-classic Yale view in whole-plate, stereo and *carte-de-visite* format. Richard Maynard took his camera to Yale first in 1868 and again in the 1880s; he was the only photographer to record the town during both the gold-rush and CPR eras. However, it was Frederick Dally, possibly the most prolific and prominent of the province’s pioneer photographers, who produced the view that received the greatest attention.

In business from 1866 to 1870, Dally was active during the heyday of early photography on paper, a time when photographs were eagerly collected in a variety of formats, and a period when each photographer was his own publisher. Photographing subjects which he anticipated would interest the buying public, Dally then displayed prints in his gallery where the public could examine the samples and place orders for copies for their album or *carte-de-visite* collections. He did not produce photographs for stereoscopic viewing, but did have leather-bound albums and cardboard mounts specially made and imprinted with his name for the presentation of large and small prints. Travelling away from his Victoria studio, Dally was able to exercise a degree of creativity in his choice and rendering of subjects, but as a professional whose livelihood depended upon public patronage he was in some measure guided by what

would attract orders for prints — ultimately, portraits of Indians and public figures, street scenes in the colonial capital and “views of every important place from Yale to Cariboo.”⁵

In 1867 and again in 1868, Dally travelled to the gold fields of the Cariboo pursuing a lucrative itinerant trade in likenesses and views. It was on one of these trips that *Yale, Fraser River, British Columbia* (Plate III) was taken. When Dally set up his camera and portable darkroom on the bank of the Fraser, the scene that confronted him on the ground glass was more than likely already familiar to him. As a personal friend of Frederick Whymper and as founder of the Victoria Art Union, Dally probably was acquainted with Whymper’s sketches and watercolours. As an importer of English engravings and a middle-class adventurer lured to British Columbia by reports of its riches, he may have seen the 1866 engraving in the *Illustrated London News*. And while Dally may never have had an opportunity to see a copy of Claudet’s photograph of Yale, he would surely have stopped to examine a similar view among the work on display in Gentile’s gallery adjoining Dally’s own premises in the Occidental Building during the winter of 1865-66. But evidently Dally was not deterred by the fact that the scene had been recorded before. Claudet was not producing prints commercially, and both Whymper and Gentile had left the colony by the time Dally started up the Fraser for the first time. With a ready market and with no other competition, Dally had an opportunity to capitalize on the sustained public appeal of this postcard view. Accordingly he set up his camera on the bank of the Fraser and recorded the scene yet again.

It is clear from a comparison of photographs of Yale by Claudet, Gentile (not illustrated) and Dally that the outward appearance of the town had not changed appreciably throughout the mid-1860s. New stores had sprung up along mainstreet; a porch was added here, a false-front there. The log house (present in Whymper’s watercolour and the engraving in the *Illustrated London News*) which once housed the Hudson’s Bay Company store and fort had been removed and some vacant lots had given way to modest frame buildings. But if there had been little change in the physical appearance of the town, and though growth had slowed due to falling economic fortunes, public fascination with Yale had not waned. When Gentile returned from an excursion through the Interior with a series of photographs of Yale, Lillooet, Douglas, Lytton, Hope, Clinton and other places “of interest,” the *British Columbian*

⁵ *Cariboo Sentinel*, 6 September 1868, p. 3.



PLATE III. *Yale, Fraser River, British Columbia*, by Frederick Dally, [1867 or 1868], albumen paper print from wet collodion glass negative (1905).

COURTESY OF THE PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

praised his views for the way in which they conveyed “a very graphic illustration of the magnificent scenery of the country, as well as of the progress of civilization.”⁶ To an audience enthralled by evidence of the gold-rush excitement, even after the days of placer mining and overnight fortunes had passed, Yale signified the rapid growth of towns on the gold-rush frontier. Nestled between the mountains and the river, it offered a suitable juxtaposition of wilderness and civilization to satisfy the Victorian penchant for proof of Man’s mastery over Nature; a photograph which combined such symbolic and aesthetic merit commanded considerable market appeal.

Yale, Fraser River, British Columbia continued to receive attention after Dally sold his business and left the colony in the fall of 1870. The Green Brothers, who purchased Dally’s stock-in-trade, and Richard Maynard, who subsequently acquired Dally’s negatives, both marketed prints from his original glass plates under their own names. It was as an illustration in the pictorial press, however, that Dally’s view of Yale was most widely circulated. In January 1873, *British Columbia — Yale, head of navigation on the Fraser River* (Plate IV), appeared in the *Canadian Illustrated News* published by Desbarats of Montreal. Unlike the *Illustrated London News*, the publication did not mention the source of the image — either that it was taken by Dally or that it was from a photograph at all; only the initials of the engraver, B. Kroupa, whose work appeared frequently on the pages of the *Canadian Illustrated*, appear in the lower right corner of the illustration. Kroupa faithfully reproduced Dally’s view in his wood-block engraving, exercising little artistic licence; only the fence has been removed from the left foreground, and even the beached logs have been retained. It is also interesting to note that the accompanying text describes not Yale but the Fraser River — its course, its resources and its scenery. The town, in decline, was deserving of note only for its “pleasant position on the Fraser River, at the point where the stream becomes navigable to the ocean.”⁷ But if there was little to say about Yale itself, the visual image still had popular appeal.

At least a dozen of Dally’s British Columbia views were engraved for publication in the *Canadian Illustrated News* between January 1872 and January 1873, and many more appeared in print throughout the remainder of the decade. None were credited to Dally; several were attributed to “the Notman party that accompanied Messrs Selwyn and Rich-

⁶ *British Columbian*, 16 September 1865, p. 3, col. 2.

⁷ *Canadian Illustrated News*, 25 January 1873, p. 51.



PLATE IV. *British Columbia — Yale, the head of navigation on the Fraser River*, wood engraving by “B. K.” [B. Kroupa, from a photograph by Frederick Dally]; published in the *Canadian Illustrated News*, 25 January 1873, p. 52 (c-58984).

COURTESY OF THE PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA

ardson,” suggesting that photographs by Dally were brought back to Montreal by Benjamin Baltzly, the photographer from the firm of William Notman who was assigned to the Geological Survey of Canada expedition led by Alfred Selwyn through British Columbia in 1871. Baltzly returned with more than a hundred negatives of his own, but evidently purchased a series of views from the Green Brothers during his stay in Victoria. Baltzly spent two days in Yale on his way into the Interior, and noted in his journal that it was “an interesting place of about six hundred inhabitants, a few Chinamen, and at the upper end a large Indian village.” Though he remarked that the view looking up the Fraser was “incredibly grand,” he did not take any photographs in the immediate vicinity.⁸

The pictorial press commonly acknowledged photographic sources, for the phrase “from a photograph” underscored the veracity of an illustration and satisfied the Victorian viewer, desirous of “truthful” images and certain that the camera did not lie. But the *Canadian Illustrated News* feature on Yale and the Fraser River did not convey contemporary reality. Presumably the pictorial weekly purported to be a courier of current news and views, but neither the engraving nor the text were up-to-date. Though probably the most recent photograph available, Dally’s view was five years old, and it had been almost a decade since the banks of the lower Fraser could rightfully have been described as “rich in auriferous deposit.” Nevertheless, Yale still offered the viewing public a visual image that was a pleasing mix of frontier progress and picturesque scenery; any discrepancy between image and reality was easily overlooked in favour of the satisfaction of a popular portrayal.

Another sort of harmless deception in published illustrations was perpetrated by Lucius O’Brien in his *Yale*, engraved for *Picturesque Canada*. Modelled on the successful *Picturesque America*, the publishers, Belden Bros. of Toronto, sought to produce a lavishly illustrated book, unashamedly intended “to stimulate national sentiment” by presenting places of historical and geographical interest to proud Canadians. O’Brien, President of the Royal Canadian Academy and Art Director for *Picturesque Canada*, co-ordinated and supervised the efforts of several artists, and himself produced on-the-spot sketches of scenes in eastern Canada. His signature on *Yale* surely intended to suggest that the engraving was made from another *plein-air* sketch. But Doreen Walker

⁸ Andrew Birrell, *Benjamin Baltzly. Photographs & Journal of an Expedition through British Columbia: 1871* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1978), p. 111.

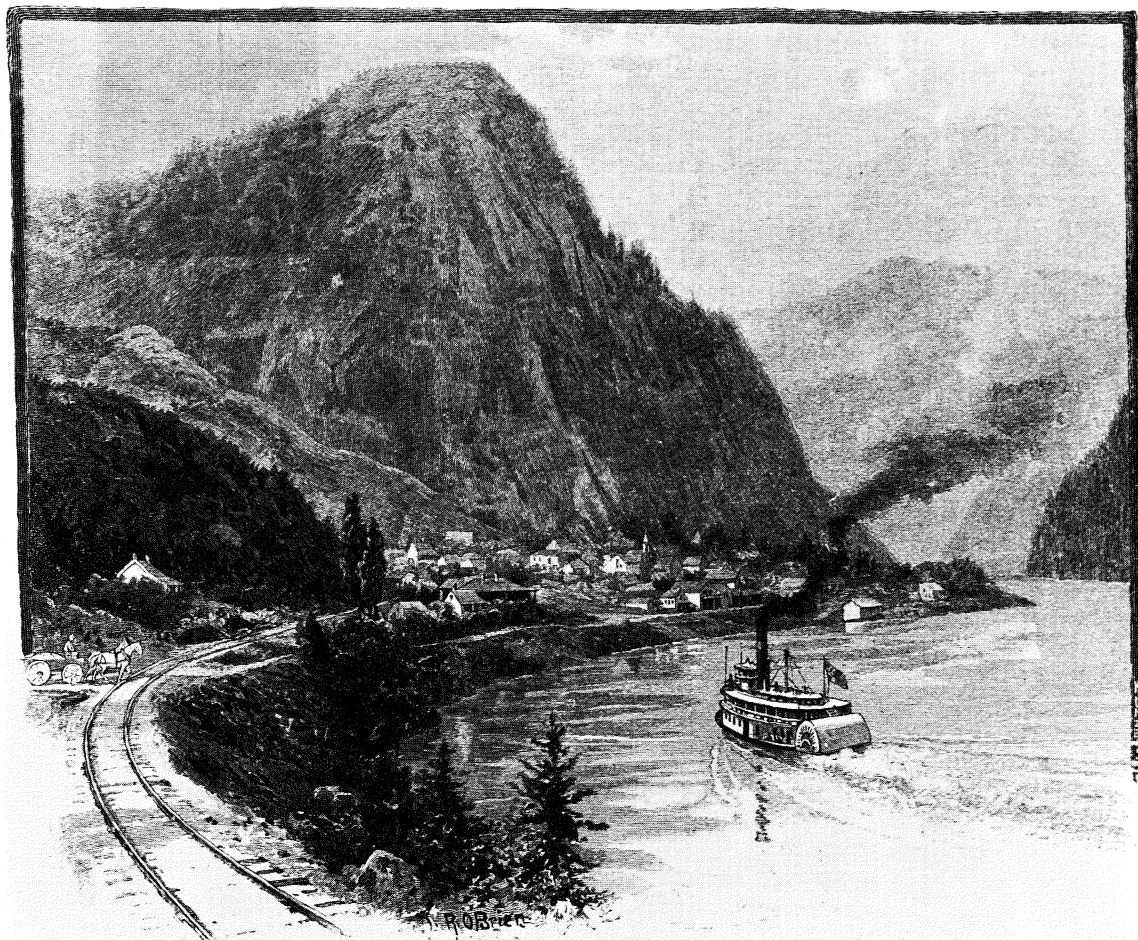


PLATE V. *Yale*, wood engraving by Kunze from a painting by Lucius R. O'Brien; published in *Picturesque Canada*, Vol. II (1884), p. 379 (c-85577). COURTESY OF THE PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA

has noted that O'Brien did not, in fact, travel to British Columbia until 1886, two years after the publication of six of his B.C. views in the last instalment of *Picturesque Canada* published in the fall of 1884.⁹ The view must therefore have been based on some second-hand source. Walker suggests that one or more photographs, unacknowledged in the final work, were used by O'Brien to produce *Yale*.

There is no doubt that the left side of O'Brien's view was derived from a photograph of Yale taken by Richard Maynard for CPR contractor Andrew Onderdonk.¹⁰ In February 1882, "a set of photographs . . . of the railway works in progress between Yale and Boston Bar" was sent to Sandford Fleming by H. J. Cambie,¹¹ and it is possible that O'Brien solicited views from the CPR when faced with the task of providing illustrations of British Columbia and the West for *Picturesque Canada*. The right side of O'Brien's *Yale* incorporates a compressed cross-section of the river valley, and may have been taken from another photograph or perhaps from a sketch made by the Marquis of Lorne during his visit to British Columbia in 1882.¹²

Clearly O'Brien used second-hand sources for *Yale* and for several other British Columbia views that appeared in *Picturesque Canada*. His failure to acknowledge his sources may reflect both a reluctance to admit dependence on a mechanically produced image and a desire to make the readership believe that the western scenes, like the eastern views, were painted from nature. The use of photographic or other sources by an artist of O'Brien's stature would surely have been frowned upon. At first embraced as drawing aids or "sketches" themselves, photographs quickly became denigrated as crutches, reducing the artist's reliance upon his own talent. This occurred despite the prominence of photographers such as Notman and Fraser on the art scene, whose Toronto studio (established in 1868) became a gathering spot, exhibition hall and place of employment for many artists. The *Illustrated London News*' reason for admitting a photographic source — greater validity as a document —

⁹ Doreen Walker, "Lucius R. O'Brien (1832-1899): Photographic Sources for Certain British Columbia Views," unpublished manuscript [1981].

¹⁰ "View of Yale from A. O.'s [Andrew Onderdonk's] Residence" [by Richard Maynard, c. 1881], Provincial Archives of British Columbia 75037.

¹¹ Letter from H. J. Cambie to Sandford Fleming, 3 February 1882. Public Archives of Canada MG 29 A 8, volume 7, file 47.

¹² This view of Yale was later engraved by Edward Whymper, Frederick's brother, for publication in *Canadian Pictures, Drawn with Pen and Pencil* (London: The Religious Tract Society, [1884]) by the Marquis of Lorne. It was Lorne who appointed O'Brien the first President of the Royal Canadian Academy in 1880.

does not operate here where reliance on a photograph would seem to lower the status of the image rather than raise it.

Why, if O'Brien's work was based on photographs, was such a sketch necessary? Perhaps the photograph was considered too descriptive and unselective for a publication intended to be more artistic than journalistic; quite possibly the engraver was a technician, trained only in wood engraving, not artistic composition. Aesthetic considerations subtly adapted the usual Yale viewpoint to reinforce the boosting message of *Picturesque Canada*. The paddlewheeler is not moored, but steaming in on a diagonal, paralleling the prominent railroad tracks. Together, the two imply a dynamism which the advent of the CPR did not bring to the town. The houses are pushed farther back into the middle ground, to allow the whole mountain to rise impressively in a landscape of great breadth. By such means are convincing visual arguments made.

Examination of these five images of Yale not only illustrates the ways in which visual images were disseminated before the widespread adoption of half-tone technology, but also demonstrates numerous interpretive complications, unexpected in such similar views. First, the consistency of image does not imply a static, little-changing town, but reflects a constant aesthetic. Clearly there was a convenient geographical vantage point from which Yale could be portrayed, but the popularity of views from this vantage point (as opposed to those from other locations) suggests that they embodied the norms of artistic composition shared by the audiences addressed. These norms were more important than the individual features of the town itself; they operated as the framework even for the photograph by Dally, which is as set-back and generalized as the watercolour or the engravings, despite photography's unparalleled ability to focus on detail. From a critical perspective, we must be suspicious of the willingness of the image-maker to shape his picture to suit his audience's expectations and his own compositional training. Further, we should recognize that an image might have been created as a document or as an artistic production; attribution of the image is often a useful clue here. The *Illustrated London News*, for example, acknowledged the photographer but not the engraver; *Picturesque Canada* acknowledged the artist and the engraver, but not the photographer; the *Canadian Illustrated News*, most reluctant of all, acknowledged the engraver only by his initials. Because the visual perceptions of these individuals shaped the image, it is generally important to recognize their role in the process. With engravings in particular, it is essential to discover whether they were

based on photographs or paintings (and the extent of their manipulation — as in the combination of photographs probably used by O'Brien) if they are to be adequately used or judged in an historical context.

Thirdly, we must recall that engraving was a highly standardized technique, and that for the sake of speed in production, source views (paintings, drawings, photographs) were often cut up and distributed to several technicians who produced wood-blocks interpreting the scene in lines. Each technician had to utilize the same linear “style” so that the view would appear uniform when the blocks were joined. The joints of such blocks are readily visible in the *Illustrated London News* engraving (Plate II). This standardized technique, even when a view was created on a single block, tended to make all wood engravings look like one another, rather than like the “original” painting or photograph from which they were taken. After they had undergone “interpretation” by the engraver, all images acquired a sameness and a uniform plausibility that masked the original medium.

Quite apart from the question of the artist, engraver or photographer — his skill, style or intent — it is not surprising that this view of Yale became a visual cliché. At a glance it tells the story of the town's existence, commenting on setting, commerce and transportation. Clearly, the landscape elements came together in the proper mix and proportions to satisfy the nineteenth-century obsession with the picturesque. The false-fronts of saloons, hotels, stores and liveries lining the main thoroughfare attested to the flow of people, goods and money, and the receding lines of rooftops culminating in the spire of the Church of St. John the Divine witnessed the commitment of the resident population to the settlement of the place. Steamers, wagons and railroad tracks described the town's links to coast, Cariboo and the rest of Canada. Little wonder that this single composition was appreciated and used as a vehicle to carry an impression of Yale to other parts of the colony, the country and the world.