Books and the Historical Photograph

DAVID MATTISON

The principal function of illustration has been the conveyance of information.
— WILLIAM M. IVINS, JR., *How Prints Look.* 1958

Photographs have long been used in the illustration of books about British Columbia — not just landscapes or portraits, but images of historic events, regions and persons. It is with these latter kinds of visual documentation, as presented in several books on British Columbia history published between 1970 and 1980, that this article concerns itself.

One of the earliest books on an aspect of British Columbia history utilizing halftone reproductions, the most popular means of printing photographs in books today, was Margaret McNaughton's *Overland to Cariboo* (1896). Even more important than the reproduction technique was the manner in which the photographs were linked to the text and how the author employed the images as historical evidence. Sadly, however, some of her information concerning the photographs was in error.

Publications on British Columbia history using photographs have presented the photograph in varying contexts and degrees of factual interpretation. Too often in the past, historical photographs have been selected for printing in a book as aesthetic afterthoughts on the part of an author or editor. This article examines some books which have photographs representing the work of two photographers, one city and the province. The context, author's interpretation and documentation of the images, and design elements are some of the aspects that will be covered.

As an aid to historians and other scholars who wish further information about historical photography in British Columbia, this select and briefly annotated bibliography has been compiled of major works about nineteenth-century photographers and photography in the province.

Benjamin Baltzly: *Photographer as Documentarian*

The first book to compile the photographs of a nineteenth-century British Columbia photographer meets high scholarly and design stan-

dards, and writers and publishers can learn much from it. Part of an informal series on early Canadian photographers, Andrew Birrell's *Benjamin Baltzly* (1978) recreates the photographic results of an 1871 Geological Survey of Canada journey through the interior of the province. The horizontal format and the duotone reproductions in a catalogue-like presentation are similar to the other two volumes in the series.

Baltzly's work, as Birrell notes in his introductory chapters, is important to B.C. history because of "the evidence it provides of the history of a river [the Fraser] now conquered by the railway, but also for the technical and, occasionally, for the artistic excellence of the results." Birrell describes Baltzly's work as "easily the best done in British Columbia during the decade," an opinion not supported by visual or textual comparisons to other photographers' work in the 1870s and earlier. Birrell's judgment may have been influenced by critical comment in the nineteenth-century press on Baltzly's photographs.

One major justification for publishing Baltzly's photographs was the journal of his impressions of the expedition, which appeared in the Montreal *Gazette* the following summer. This major primary textual source, a rare occurrence in the history of Canadian photography, is linked to the photographer's visual output. References to the photographs in the journal are identified in the margins, along with footnotes clarifying various statements by Baltzly that do not correlate with the report of Alfred Selwyn, who led the expedition.

There are two unusual features about Birrell's use of the journal. The photographs in the portfolio section are not arranged in complete chronological order, and there are a few discrepancies between Baltzly's references to his picture-taking and Birrell's identification of these images. The latter was noted by Birrell. Furthermore, all photograph references in the journal section are flagged by an asterisk, a minor design flaw when more than one paragraph is identified on a page.

Benjamin Baltzly provides the reader with a thorough geographic exploration of the great Fraser-Thompson River route as far north as the Yellowhead Pass. The expedition's way is traced on an 1871 map. Each photograph is titled and dated as accurately as possible. It is not entirely clear where and when Birrell has followed titles supplied by William Notman, the Montreal photographer who sponsored Baltzly's trip and who attempted to market the images. Birrell does state that some of the titles by Notman are inaccurate.

Although a complete set of images does not exist, Birrell has compiled

a checklist of all known photographs from this journey. The plate number to the reproduction in the book, the Notman identification number, title, date and the institution in which the original prints are found are all listed. A total of 125 photographs were taken, more than half being stereo views, the remainder 8 x 10 inches; seventy-one were chosen for reproduction.

The photographs are reproduced by the duotone process, where two halftone negatives are combined, usually with two coloured inks, to produce a crisp image which carries some depth. The tonal values of the reproductions are sympathetic to those of nineteenth-century photographs or to what many imagine these photographs to have looked like. Reproduction is not full size but closely proportionate to the original dimensions with some slight cropping. All the stereo views were halved and enlarged to reveal the detail. The rounded borders of the stereos and some of the 8 x 10 inch prints were retained.

While Birrell did not exploit or explore the Baltzly photographs for information found within the images, the potential is certainly there for a full treatment of the photographs from geological, cultural and aesthetic perspectives. *Benjamin Baltzly* will thus serve the dual purpose of revealing the nature of the B.C. terrain in 1871 and one photographer's reaction, in visual and verbal contexts, to the environment as he experienced it. The difference between consulting the original prints and consulting the published prints is probably minimal in cases where the content of the images is more important to a researcher than the context in which the print was generated. The context includes not only the photographer's visual contribution, but also textual annotations as well as annotations by persons who may have owned a print under study. This is a major limitation of using reproductions as historical source material; there is no substitute for the real thing. Knowing, however, that the publisher is planning future volumes on other British Columbia photographers contemporary with Baltzly will only increase the research value of Birrell's publication, for it will be possible to compare and contrast, using equivalent books, the work of Baltzly's predecessors and successors.

The Magic Box: *Photographer as Artist*

Hannah and Richard Maynard of Victoria were two prominent West Coast photographers whose careers spanned half a century. Their output was prodigious and the bulk of their negatives and prints, inherited by their son Albert, like his father a shoemaker-photographer, was eventually

acquired by the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. The Maynards not only created their own photographs, they also acquired the output of others, most notably the negatives of Frederick Dally (fl. 1866-1870). The Maynards marketed Dally's work as their own, and the repercussions of this are still evident in books and articles published recently wherein Dally's images are identified as the work of Richard Maynard.

The Magic Box (1980), by Claire Weissman Wilks, is the first book to study a B.C. photographer from an artistic perspective. Unfortunately, lack of knowledge of the B.C. photographic record and of photographic history in general led the author to impose the title "eccentric genius" upon Hannah Maynard. No evidence other than the author's own enthusiastic approval of Mrs. Maynard's work has been provided to support this high opinion. Hannah Maynard's experimental multiple images and the composite prints, "Gems of British Columbia," may contain allegorical wisdom and deep psychological overtones relating to the photographer's personal life, but this is hardly justification for elevating her to the rank of genius. Her subjects were eccentric in many respects, but her style was commonplace.

There is no qualifying statement by Wilks on the theme and purpose of *The Magic Box*, nor is the scope of the book clearly defined, for the author includes photographs by Richard Maynard. The photographs chosen by Wilks are representative of the Maynards' output, but the selection criteria are not stated. The bulk of the photographs by Hannah Maynard are portraits from the last two decades of the nineteenth century, while her husband's images are landscape views.

The biographical details of the Maynards' lives are covered in an introductory essay that begins with a paragraph about the author's discovery of the glass negatives and prints in the Provincial Archives. Good use is made of the little textual documentation the Maynards left behind. Various entries in diaries (a rather ambiguous term for what were essentially notes scribbled in pocket tablets) are quoted and observations made on possible symbolism and psychological meanings. A book by Jan Gould, *Women of British Columbia* (1975), which contains a short biography of Hannah Maynard, is quoted as though what Gould wrote were fact when it is indeed fiction.

The "Gems" composite prints and the multiple images are a highlight of the book and well treated in the introduction, except that the author does not explore alternatives to their creation and place within photographic history. While the circumstantial evidence is quite strong for Hannah being responsible for the "Gems," the case is less certain for the

multiple images and the playful photosculptures which may have been the conception of a young man named Arthur S. Rappertie, who appears to have begun his photographic career with Mrs. Maynard about 1880 and continued with her studio for the next thirty years.

The reproductions are duotones coloured to resemble the collodion or gelatine emulsion papers introduced around 1891. The reproductions successfully capture the vivid and never forgotten maroon tone of many gelatine emulsion paper prints. The author does not explain the choice and significance of the colour tone chosen for the book. Many of the duotones were created from contact prints made from the original glass negatives, a fact also unstated. Sizes of the original prints and negatives are not given, but it can be assumed that some cropping did occur. The "Gems" are reproduced in proportion to the originals and almost full-size.

Brief comments form the caption information to over one hundred reproductions. The photographs are arranged by subject or theme. A few portraits which have interesting mounts are reproduced in full; one of the least successful but most unusual reproductions is that of a three-dimensional *bas-relief* portrait which does not quite prove effective in two dimensions. *The Magic Box* is a browsing book, a pleasant excursion into the world as seen through the lenses of Hannah and Richard Maynard's cameras. An appealing and useful introduction to their photographs, even with its faults, *The Magic Box* sets the stage for further treatments of the Maynards' work and its place in Canadian and British Columbian photographic history.

Urban History: Recalling Vancouver's Past Century

Book publishing, being a cost-conscious business activity, frequently leaves itself little or no room in which to manoeuvre, particularly with illustrated histories where the image is far more important than the text. Factors affecting design quality and historical accuracy revolve around the reproduction size of the original print or negative, the kind of paper chosen for the book and the photomechanical process.

Three works that bear comparison on these factors — primarily because they use many of the same photographs — are Derek Pethick's *Vancouver Recalled* (1974), Raymond Hull and Gordon and Christine Soules' *Vancouver's Past* (1974), and *Vancouver's First Century* (1977) edited by the *Urban Reader* staff. The latter book was a refinement and expansion of a series of illustrated pastiches published in the *Urban Reader* between 1974 and 1976.

The first two books are remarkably similar in content, with Pethick's a far richer compendium of illustrations. Pethick's effort is less useful from a documentary standpoint, but better designed though not as well printed as either the Hull-Soules collaboration or the *Urban Reader* production. None of the photographs or line illustrations in *Vancouver Recalled* are identified by institution, but the names of the four institutional sources are listed on the verso of the title page. The other two books identify institutional sources by page number, a useful first step for those wishing further information on the images.

Caption information is minimal in *Vancouver Recalled*, while *Vancouver's Past* contains more descriptive and interpretative captions for the same photographs. Reproductions in the latter are duotone, while those of *Vancouver Recalled* are a flat and uninspiring halftone whose density values vary enormously, a problem that could have been corrected at the printing stage.

By comparing the images in all three books it is possible to see where the principles of good design sometimes interfere with the presentation of visual information. Photographs in all three are oriented so the viewer need not turn the book. This means that many photographs will have been cropped, perhaps at the sacrifice of pertinent visual information, while others may have been reduced in size or enlarged and cropped.

None of the three discusses the original prints and negatives or how the reproductions may have altered the photographer's presentation of an event. Books such as these do not encourage treatment of the photograph as a source document with a unique perspective on the past, but their publication does convey to an audience the existence of a remarkable array of images documenting the activities of urban life.

Even the most expressive and visually appealing photograph will suffer in the viewer's mind when printed on an inappropriate finish of paper. Semi-gloss and matte papers are the most suitable for reproducing photographs, while glossy and certain finishes of textured papers prove too distracting for pleasurable viewing. The use of the duotone process on the wrong finish can also be disastrous, as can the choice of a second colour for the duotone. The duotones in *Vancouver's Past* are a tasteless green hue, and do not compare well with the same duotone images in *Vancouver's First Century*. The difference in quality between the duotone prints of *Vancouver's Past* and *Vancouver's First Century* and the halftone prints of *Vancouver Recalled* is readily apparent. The halftones lack contrast and depth, yet if carefully printed on the right paper they

could have conveyed the same amount of detail and visual punch as the duotones.

The three books illustrate a problem common to other urban histories — the continued use of images and their transition in the viewer's consciousness into visual clichés. The usual lacklustre captions, some of which repeat myths and errors, do not add to the reader's confidence in any of these works. None of the books provides more than a passing link between photographs and text.

Vancouver's First Century really is a "city album," but the photographs, with their stagnant captions, lack human presence, though many illustrate daily life in the city. Without any textual references the reader is left to founder between the bare facts of the captions and the often anecdotal remarks of pioneers taken mainly from a seven-volume oral history project undertaken by City of Vancouver Archivist Major J. S. Matthews between 1931 and 1956. Some of the reproductions — those printed as high-contrast black-and-white images — are not identified. The use of this kind of reproduction is not explained. These images resemble photocopies taken from newspaper advertisements and may confuse readers unfamiliar with this technique.

Though these three books rely primarily on illustrations as a means towards an end, that end is never stated. The editors of *Vancouver's First Century* do not explain why photographs are important to their album of city life, but they do acknowledge in their preface the vital role of photographers in preserving aspects of the past which convey information in a way no textual document can. David Brock's introductory essay goes a step further by remarking on the immediacy of the visual elements. In an increasingly visual age, it is vital that readers be informed of both the limitations and advantages that come with using historical photographs.

Provincial History: Twixt Image and Text

The same popularization and casual treatment of photographs found in the three pictorial urban histories are to be seen in two books that are so similar in style and content that the publication of the second hardly seems justified. George Woodcock's *A Picture History of British Columbia* (1980) is the latest in general visual histories of Canadian provinces published by Hurtig. Despite the availability of more accurate information on many of the photographs, Woodcock's captions are no more accurate or full than those in Derek Pethick's *British Columbia Recalled* (1974). Both books show an insensitivity to photographs as historical documents. Woodcock at least acknowledges that he has not "attempted

to establish an exact correlation between text and illustrations. . . . The illustrations are pictorial parallels that both complement and supplement the text."

Being general histories, both books will probably be heavily used by secondary school and college students. Certain errors embodied in photographs will continue to be perpetuated. For example, a photograph in Woodcock's book attributed to E. S. Curtis and showing Kwakiutl winter dances is dated to the turn of the century; it was actually taken in 1914 during the filming of Curtis' great ethnographic feature *In the Land of the Head-Hunters.* Woodcock and Pethick also use engravings based on photographs, a fact not brought to the reader's attention.

Another notable deficiency is the inconsistency of identifying works of art by artists but of not establishing the photographer's identity. Often knowing the photographer is the first step in accurately dating a photograph. Both books use many photographs for which conclusive dates, at least to the year, have been established.

In facing the monumental task of compiling a pictorial record of British Columbia, Woodcock and Pethick chose different paths which led to similar contents. Pethick limited his coverage to the period between European discovery of the Northwest Coast of North America and British Columbia's entry into Confederation. Woodcock takes a universalist approach and courses through exploration and discovery to the late 1970s.

Woodcock provides full institutional identification, including catalogue numbers, while Pethick states that all illustrations except a few were from the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. Woodcock's book is indexed (text only) while Pethick's is not, although its ratio of text to illustrations is comparable to the Woodcock venture. Remarkably bankrupt in terms of scholarship despite being close in content, these two works do not do justice to British Columbia's impressive photographic and historical record.

Conclusion

Photographic histories of British Columbia and its regions show a remarkable naiveté in terms of respect for and utilization of the photographic image as more than another pretty picture. Design sophistication is evident in imaginative layouts and use of the duotone printing process, although, as always, poor quality control over printing reduces the effectiveness of even the most innovative layout. The repetitive nature of many pictorial histories is to be regretted, particularly since none to date has improved upon the weaknesses of preceding works. The two stud-

ies of early British Columbia photographers demonstrate the diversity of approaches that can be taken.

Inadequate research on historical photographs seems to be a constant problem with popular pictorial histories. This is unfortunate because the public deserves better than poor scholarship. A first step in improving accuracy would be an acknowledgement by the authors of such books of the crucial role of the photographers themselves in selecting and defining the present-becoming-past. Knowing who the photographer was may lead to new discoveries about the context and meaning of a photograph.

With new images being created every day, the research potential of historical photographs of British Columbia should remain at a near infinite state. The books reviewed here represent a few patterns of awareness on the part of author, designer and publisher; the diversity contained within the photographic images of British Columbia is barely covered by any of these books, let alone by the two pictorial histories of the province. With a better understanding of how the photograph manipulates and can be manipulated, better illustrated histories and photographic studies can and will be produced.

WORKS CITED

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

Gould, Jan. *Women of British Columbia* (Saanichton: Hancock House, 1975).

Hull, Raymond, Gordon Soules, and Christine Soules. *Vancouver's Past* (Vancouver: Gordon Soules, 1974).

Kloppenborg, Anne, ed. *Vancouver's First Century: A City Album, 1860-1960* (Vancouver: J. J. Douglas, 1977).

McNaughton, Margaret. *Overland to Cariboo: An Eventful Journey of Canadian Pioneers to the Gold-Fields of British Columbia in 1862* (Toronto: W. Briggs, 1896).

Pethick, Derek, and Susan Im Baumgarten. *British Columbia Recalled: A Picture History, 1741-1871* (Saanichton: Hancock House, 1974).

Pethick, Derek. *Vancouver Recalled: A Pictorial History to 1887* (Saanichton: Hancock House, 1974).

Wilks, Claire Weissman. *The Magic Box: The Eccentric Genius of Hannah Maynard* (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1980).

Woodcock, George. *A Picture History of British Columbia* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1980).