

BOOK REVIEWS

LOOKING AT PICTURES: A REVIEW ESSAY

Jill Wade

Faces of British Columbia: Looking at the Past, 1860-1960, by Rosemary Neering and Joe Thompson. Vancouver/Toronto: Whitecap 1995. 163 pp. Photos. \$24.95 paper.

Flapjacks and Photographs: The Life Story of the Famous Camp Cook and Photographer Mattie Gunterman, by Henri Robideau. Vancouver: Polestar 1995. 204 pp. Photos, maps. \$24.95 paper.

Underlying Vibrations: The Photography and Life of John Vanderpant, by Sheryl Salloum. Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart, 1995. xi, 96 pp. Photos. \$35.00 paper.

These three new titles mark, perhaps unknowingly, an anniversary of sorts in the history of photography in British Columbia. In 1976, Christopher Varley and Fred Douglas mounted a show called *Eleven Early British Columbian Photographers* at the Vancouver Art Gallery and raised the historical photograph to the status of an art object.¹ This small but important exhibition included some of the prints of the amateur photographer Mattie Gunterman (1872-1945). That same year Charles C. Hill's exhibition of the extraordinary prints of the studio photographer John Vanderpant (1884-1939) came to Vancouver from the National Gallery of Canada.² Since 1976, the work of Mattie Gunterman and John Vanderpant and the history of British Columbia's

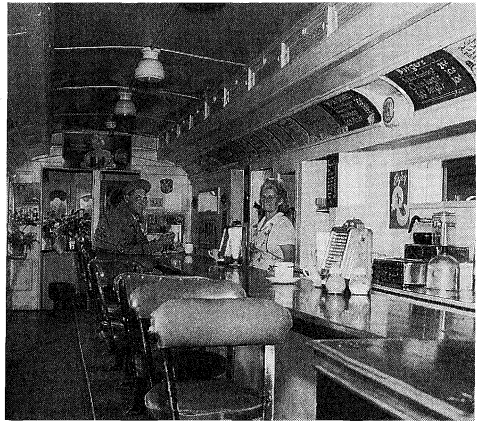
¹ Vancouver Art Gallery, *Eleven Early British Columbian Photographers, 1890-1940*, an exhibition organized by Christopher Varley with the help of Fred Douglas, 11 March to 4 April 1976 (Vancouver: The Gallery 1976). Varley is the grandson of Frederick H. Varley, the Group of Seven artist and John Vanderpant's friend.

² Charles C. Hill, *John Vanderpant Photographs/Photographies* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada 1976). This show followed Hill's momentous exhibition of Depression-era paintings; see his *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada 1975).



PLATE 1. "Pacific Great Eastern railway station, D'Arcy," n.d., is, in the words of Rosemary Neering and Joe Thompson, "a marvellous photograph, clear, well composed, a window on British Columbia's past." Yet it has little scholarly importance other than "the general lack of bustle associated with the PGE" in the 1910s. From Neering and Thompson, *Faces of British Columbia*, 103. BCARS C-01170

PLATE 2. "Streetcar turned diner, near Victoria," n.d., is another example of an image appreciated for its own endearing qualities but having no particular relevance to any research topic. From Neering and Thompson, *Faces of British Columbia*, 160. BCARS D-07565



photography in general have continued to engage social, cultural, and art historians, and these recently published titles are the products of that interest.

The critical thought put forth by a diverse group of authors in a special 1981-82 issue of *BC Studies* has shaped to some extent the way in which historians of all stripes look at photography.³ The consensus, as asserted by the guest editor, Joan Schwartz of the National Archives of Canada, was that historians and others should use photographs as primary source material rather than as simple illustration in scholarly and popular writing. Indeed, the authors "all share[d] a common respect for the photograph as an historical document."⁴ In art history, of course, a reproduction of an art object has long been accepted as a primary source.

Since 1982, historians have continued to use pictures as illustrations, and, despite the assertions of Schwartz and the other *BC Studies* contributors, I see

³ Joan M. Schwartz, ed., "The Past in Focus: Photography and British Columbia, 1858-1914," *BC Studies* 52 (Winter 1981/82).

⁴ Schwartz, "The Past in Focus," 14-5.



PLATE 3. "Bella Coola Highway, official opening, 1955" is another diverting image from Rosemary Neering's and Joe Thompson's "pictorial romp" through British Columbia history. They use the photograph to describe rather than to analyze the developing infrastructure in the W.A.C. Bennett years. From Neering and Thompson, *Faces of British Columbia*, 151. BCARS H-04466

no sin in this. Some fascinating plates enhance, for example, Jeremy Mouat's *Roaring Days* and R.A.J. McDonald's *Making Vancouver*. In other instances, photographs have become visual evidence. Duncan Stacey and Susan Stacey, Sarjeet Singh Jagpal, and Ken Drushka offer their readers historical photographs of Steveston, Sikhs, and logging that are virtually as important as are their narratives, and Paul Yee and Bruce Macdonald intertwine visual material with text in an innovative fashion in *Saltwater City* and *Vancouver: A Visual History*.⁵

Faces of British Columbia is what Schwartz would term a "pictorial romp through the province's past,"⁶ and a joyful one at that. While Rosemary Neering and Joe Thompson do provide a popular history of British Columbia photography, they have collected, in reality, a "photographic album" of superb black and white images encountered when rummaging through the historical photograph collection at the British Columbia Archives and Records Service. As they say, and as all researchers know, "you come across a marvellous photograph, clear, well composed, a window on British Columbia's past. But the photograph has nothing to do with your topic, and you continue the

⁵ Jeremy Mouat, *Roaring Days: Rossland's Mines and the History of British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1995); Robert A.J. McDonald, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status and Social Boundaries, 1863-1913* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1996); Duncan Stacey and Susan Stacey, *Salmopolis: The Steveston Story* (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing 1994); Sarjeet Singh Jagpal, *Becoming Canadians: Pioneer Sikhs in Their Own Words* (Madeira Park and Vancouver: Harbour Publishing 1994); Ken Drushka, *Working in the Woods: A History of Logging on the West Coast* (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing 1992); Paul Yee, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Vancouver/Toronto/Seattle: Douglas and McIntyre/University of Washington Press 1988); and Bruce Macdonald, *Vancouver: A Visual History* (Vancouver: Talonbooks 1992).

⁶ Schwartz, "The Past in Focus," 14.

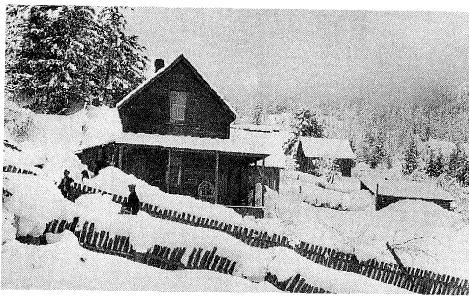


PLATE 4. "This is the house Mattie [Gunterman] and [her husband] Will lived in after the 1927 fire." An elegantly composed image, taken about 1930 and showing Will and their son Henry, it captured another moment in Mattie's visual autobiography. From Robideau, *Flapjacks and Photographs*, plate 146.

AVERY GUNTERMAN COLLECTION

PLATE 5. In "Packer Andy Daney raw-hiding supplies up to the Nettie-L," taken in 1903, Mattie Gunterman recorded one aspect of her life as a camp cook. With her were her son, standing second from the right, and two women co-workers in the Nettie-L mine's kitchen. From Robideau, *Flapjacks and Photographs*, plate 70.

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search, returning the picture you love to its file" (Plates 1 and 2).⁷ An image of the Cariboo Road freight train, which also graces the cover of Jean Barman's *The West Beyond the West*,⁸ is a splendid old chestnut, and the picture of Flying Phil Gaglardi's arrival for the opening of the Bella Coola Road is an amusingly fresh one (Plate 3). Both plates indicate the importance of infrastructure in opening up the British Columbia Interior, but, in this book, they are random illustrations of events rather than grounds for argument. Still, Neering and Thompson have amassed a treasure trove of pictures for all to relish and use.

In Henri Robideau's *Flapjacks and Photographs*, Mattie Gunterman's remarkable photographs become primary sources in the reconstruction of her life story as a turn-of-the-century immigrant in British Columbia. Mattie took pictures to keep a visual record of her family's life (Plate 4), just as others would write autobiographies, memoirs, or letters home.⁹ With inter-

⁷ Rosemary Neering and Joe Thompson, *Faces of British Columbia: Looking at the Past, 1860-1960* (Vancouver/Toronto: Whitecap 1995), 1.

⁸ Jean Barman, *The West Beyond the West: A History of British Columbia*, rev. ed. (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press 1996).

⁹ See, for example, R. Cole Harris and Elizabeth Phillips, eds., *Letters from Windermere, 1912-1914* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press 1984).



PLATE 6. "Mattie wrote on the back of this photo [taken ca. 1930], 'Myself ready for the trap line.'" Pictures such as this, depicting Mattie's experience as a transient seasonal worker, trapper, and amateur photographer as well as a wife and mother, lend a fresh visual dimension to recent discussions about the role of women in British Columbia's new resource-based communities. From Robideau, *Flapjacks and Photographs*, plate 149. AVERY GUNTERMAN COLLECTION

PLATE 7. In "Heart of a Cabbage," dated ca. 1929-1930, John Vanderpant used the counterpoint of light and shadow and the pattern of shapes to reveal the inner essence of his subject. Vanderpant perceived a "oneness" in the "underlying vibrations" of his aesthetics and his spirituality. From Salloum, *Underlying Vibrations*, plate 5.

VANDERPANT COLLECTION

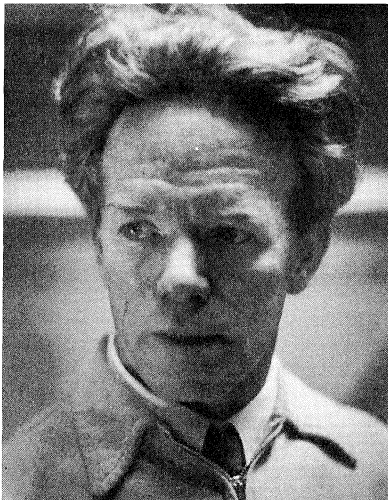
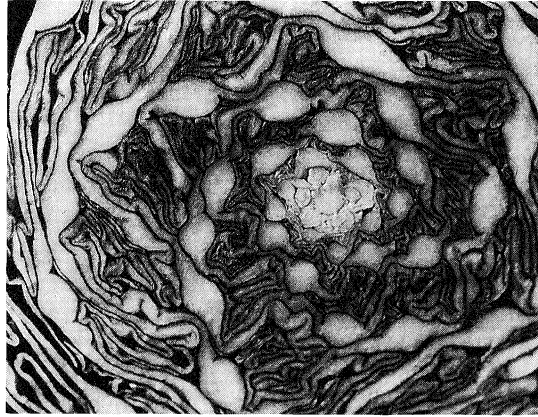


PLATE 8. "F.H. Varley," 1932. Inspired by the "oneness" of his "mental vision," John Vanderpant believed in the interconnectedness of the creative arts. He championed the modernist work of artists such as the charismatic Fred Varley, and he shaped a generation of younger artists, including B.C. Binning, by animating an "arts scene" in inter-war Vancouver. From Salloum, *Underlying Vibrations*, fig. 38.

VANDERPANT COLLECTION

views, correspondence, census data, directories, and some rich contextual history to fill in the unknown details of her life, Robideau elaborates upon Mattie's photographic album much as art historian Doreen Walker annotated the letters of Emily Carr, Nan Cheney, and Humphrey Toms,¹⁰ but he does so in the text rather than in the notes. Yet, as Mattie's biographer, he also characterizes her as "a survivor whose strength came from within" and who had "an extraordinary sense of self-identity."¹¹

In *Underlying Vibrations*, Sheryl Salloum uses a portfolio of John Vanderpant's superb photographs to tell the story of his life, his aesthetics, and his role in Vancouver's cultural development in the inter-war years. Her book is a cultural history that both complements and enlarges upon Charles Hill's art history of two decades ago.¹² As the title suggests, Salloum's recurring theme is the "oneness" of Vanderpant's spirituality and aesthetics, which inspired the incredible vitality of his images, stimulated his fiery championship of modern art, and animated his powerful sense of the wholeness of the visual, performing, and literary arts (Plates 7 and 8). This cultivation of a single, overarching idea from an abundance of illustrations brings to mind another cultural history, *From Desolation to Splendour* by Maria Tippett and Douglas Cole, whose theme was the "process of discovery and acceptance" among British Columbia's landscape artists.¹³

Clearly, historians now use photographs as primary sources in the writing of British Columbia history and art history. They could go a step farther,

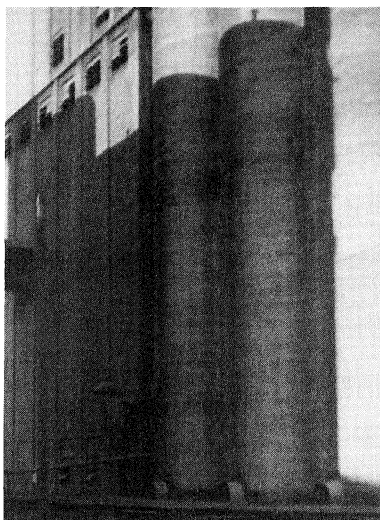


PLATE 9. "Shadow Castle," ca. 1926. John Vanderpant's increasingly abstract studies of Vancouver's grain terminals, following hard on the publication of Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* in 1923, fostered the acceptance of modern architecture in Canada. From Salloum, *Underlying Vibrations*, plate 36.

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¹⁰ Doreen Walker, ed., *Dear Nan: Letters of Emily Carr, Nan Cheney, and Humphrey Toms* (Vancouver: UBC Press 1990).

¹¹ Henri Robideau, *Flapjacks and Photographs: The Life Story of the Famous Camp Cook and Photographer Mattie Gunterman* (Vancouver: Polestar 1995), 8. Biography and photographs are more closely tied in Robideau's book than they are in Cyril E. Leonoff's excellent *An Enterprising Life: Leonard Frank, Photographs, 1895-1944* (Vancouver: Talonbooks 1990).

¹² Sheryl Salloum has also written an engaging cultural history about the writer Malcolm Lowry's years on the West Coast and Vancouver's emerging literary community; see *Malcolm Lowry: Vancouver Days* (Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing 1987).

¹³ Maria Tippett and Douglas Cole, *From Desolation to Splendour: Changing Perceptions of the British Columbia Landscape* (Toronto/Vancouver: Clarke, Irwin 1977), 9.

however, and place the results of their research within the broader sweep of history. For example, what is the significance of Mattie's visual autobiography in the social history of this province? Doesn't her life tell us something about women and families in the province's early male-dominated communities? Her family, home, and garden were in Beaton, but she supported her family as a roving camp cook for many years (Plate 5). Playing many social roles as a homemaker, transient seasonal worker, trapper, and amateur photographer, she was, in a sense, a feminine version of the colourful handlogger, bounty-hunter, trapper, and single parent August Schnarr, who towed his floathouse and three daughters around the waters and islands north of Campbell River (Plate 6).¹⁴ Mattie's life is a revealing footnote to recent discussions by Sylvia Van Kirk, Adele Perry, Jeremy Mouat, and others regarding women's place in British Columbia's new resource-based communities.¹⁵

Similarly, is it not possible to think about the significance of John Vanderpant's photography within the wider context of British Columbia's cultural, art, and social history?¹⁶ For example, what is the far-reaching effect of Vanderpant's aesthetics, as expressed in his photographs, on the development of West Coast art and architecture? His interdisciplinary approach to the arts, whether in photography or in the cultural evenings for students in his studio,¹⁷ must have contributed to the thinking of B.C. Binning in the 1920s when he attended the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts (now the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design). Many years later, as the first head of the University of British Columbia's Department of Fine Arts, Binning was a prime mover in educating and inspiring another generation of students, and his Festival of Contemporary Arts linked art, architecture, music, dance, poetry, and film. In the 1965 festival, a multi-sensory event called "The Medium Is the Message" led to the founding of Intermedia a couple of years later and to a whole decade of intense, bold avant garde

¹⁴ Campbell River Museum and Archives, interview with August Schnarr (conducted by Joan Skogan and Jan Havelaar), 15 February 1977, A28, 1-3; interview with Pansy Eddington (conducted by Brenda Einarson and Betty Hoover), 31 October 1990, A222, 1-2; interview with Pearl Macklin, n.d., A227.

¹⁵ See, for example, Sylvia Van Kirk, "A Vital Presence: Women in the Cariboo Gold Rush, 1862-1875," in *British Columbia Reconsidered: Essays on Women*, ed. Gillian Creese and Veronica Strong-Boag (Vancouver: Press Gang 1992), 21-37; Adele Perry, "'Oh I'm Just Sick of the Faces of Men': Gender Imbalance, Race, Sexuality, and Sociability in Nineteenth-Century British Columbia," *BC Studies* 105-6 (Spring-Summer 1995), 27-43; and Mouat, *Roaring Days*, 109-29.

¹⁶ In recent years, Letia Richardson has been writing, lecturing, and curating exhibitions about art and artists in the inter-war period within the context of art, cultural, and women's history. See her fascinating *First Class: Four Graduates from the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts, 1929 — Lilius Farley, Irene Hoffar Reid, Beatrice Lennie, Vera Weatherbie*, which was prepared for an exhibition held at the Floating Curatorial Gallery, Women in Focus, Vancouver, 10 September-24 October 1987 (Vancouver: The Gallery 1987).

¹⁷ Sheryl Salloum, *Underlying Vibrations: The Photography and Life of John Vanderpant* (Victoria: Horsdal and Schubart 1995), 12, 36-8.

activity.¹⁸ Furthermore, Vanderpant's photographs of Vancouver's grain terminals, so evocative of Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*, which was first published in Paris in 1923, must have advanced the inter-war and post-Second World War emergence of modern architecture in Canada (Plate 9).¹⁹ One very real connection may be found in the person of B.C. Binning, whose self-designed home in West Vancouver is a landmark in the evolution of the West Coast modern architectural style, and who was a key player in the 1950s in the innovative "Art in Living" design group.

In these three captivating books, Rosemary Neering, Joe Thompson, Henri Robideau, and Sheryl Salloum show how photographs can enrich and confirm written history. Should writers and researchers choose, however, they could also use photographs to develop and question the larger themes, issues, and theories of British Columbia's history and art history.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the publishers and John Vanderpant's family for permission to use several plates from the books reviewed in this essay. Rose Emery at the Vancouver Art Gallery Library helped me put my hands on several exhibition catalogues dimly remembered from my own gallery days. Letia Richardson's lecture about women artists in inter-war Vancouver, given at the North Vancouver Museum in February 1996, was timely, informative, and stimulating as I read and thought about these three books.

¹⁸ Vancouver Art Gallery, *Vancouver: Art and Artists, 1931-1983*, an inaugural exhibition in celebration of the opening of the new gallery at Robson Square, 15 October-31 December 1983 (Vancouver: The Gallery 1983), 142, 194; Nicholas Tuele, *B.C. Binning: A Classical Spirit* (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria 1986); and Dennis Sexsmith, "B.C. Binning, cet inconnu," *Vie des Arts* 32 (Juin 1987): 32-5, 78-9. For a highly coloured, very cavalier description of "The Medium Is the Message," see Tom Wolfe's *The Pump House Gang* (New York: Bantam 1969), 123-4. The Vancouver Art Gallery surveyed this vital decade in Vancouver art in an exhibition from 10 June 1995 to 26 May 1996.

¹⁹ Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret), *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (London/New York: Architectural Press/Praeger 1946), 29, 32. For the best quick overview of the development of modern architecture in Canada, see Harold Kalman, *A History of Canadian Architecture* (Toronto/New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994), vol. 2, 779-869.