

Toronto's Visual Legacy: Official City Photography from 1856 to the Present. STEVE MACKINNON, KAREN TEEPLE, MICHELE DALE. Toronto: James Lorimer & Company Ltd., 2009. 192 p. ISBN 978-1-55277-408-3.

Published to commemorate the one hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the City of Toronto, this volume enjoys the benefits of a booster book's fine production values but also suffers under the obligation to propose a trajectory into an optimistic future for even the most disquieting imagery. At first, the civic enthusiasm expressed in the "Message from the Mayor" seems so frankly acknowledged that it should be easy to discount when viewing the images. Further, the authors have a sophisticated awareness of archival context and describe the genesis of the chronological groups of photographs they have selected "for their aesthetic and documentary value, as well as their ability to tell a story, shock or delight" (p. 9). Almost all were created by staff photographers, many of whom had long careers with the city, serving the needs of engineers and their building projects, health inspectors and their neighbourhood improvement goals, recreation personnel and their reports on park usage, or politicians and their public relations agendas.

However, while context is there for individual images, the permeating impact of the "context of context" – the obligation to conform to an overarching civic image – is discreetly eclipsed after the introductory pages. The variety of more than one hundred and fifty years of photographic activity – from 1856 through 2008 – with its constantly evolving technical innovations and the varied talents of its practitioners, is submerged as images are selected, sequenced, and distilled into but one perspective: that of proposing an entertaining shared history of striving, growth, and achievement overcoming challenges. Nostalgia for van-

ished times and regret for past civic horrors, like the crowded slums of the early twentieth century, are succeeded by the triumph of viaducts and dancers in the streets. Consequently, the book becomes less about Toronto's civic "visual legacy" or photographic archives, and more about using archives to propose an image of Toronto and, by implication, about encouraging today's readers to compare themselves with the past, to reflect with pride on the progress of the city. Muffled ironies intrude. For example, care is taken to ensure gender balance, so that a pair of boys in baseball uniforms is immediately followed by a pair of girls in tennis outfits; this elides the fact that the girls were photographed eleven years earlier. An intriguing view of a road crew on Jarvis Street circa 1893 shows a black labourer among the white ones; yet no black reappears in any photograph until the views of the Caribana Festival in 2008, subliminally and unintentionally resonating with the stereotype that blacks are manual workers who have rhythm.

What might be learned if, instead, questions had been allowed to emerge around the images? What if their known histories could inform an exploration of what is still unknown about them, or of other reasons for their resonance? Therein lies the vigour of a constantly re-interpreted visual archives.

To test such an approach, we can look at the panoramic views of Toronto taken from the top of the Rossin House Hotel by the engineering firm of Armstrong, Beere, and Hime between November 1856 and the spring of 1857. Included as part of the presentation to Queen Victoria arguing for Toronto to be selected as the capital of the Province of Canada, the works were to function as evidence of the worthiness of the city to be the seat of government. Hence, the way in which a 360-degree panorama could give a deceptively larger impression of its subject when laid flat, rather than "wrapped around" the viewer, assisted such an argument. A flat view seems to be addressing a viewer facing forward, implying there is much more still to see to the sides and in behind. Further, the photographic emulsion's sensitivity to blue rendered an overexposed and therefore blank white sky, neutralizing any sense of weather and casting the city in a kind of ideal, utopic space delineated through a clear and steady light. This sense of an unsullied visual perfection is underwritten as well by the singularly deserted streets. Again, this was an effect of the technology: the exposure time had to be so long, that no moving objects such as people, horses, or carriages could be registered on the negative. Nevertheless, the effect was congruent with the idealizing argument. Were these effects of technology consciously used to create a deliberate and understood impression?

That aesthetics played a role is implied by the firm responsible for the images: William Armstrong, one of the principals, was also a noted landscape artist and Humphrey Lloyd Hime, another partner, was soon to produce photographs of singular poetry in the Red River area. The invention of the wet collodion process used for these exposures was recent and was widely spread only in 1855, arguing for up-to-date and visually literate creators. Do the images, cast

as evidence but already operating, as noted, at a suggestive messaging level, also act according to contemporary aesthetic norms? For example, the section of panorama on page 24 seems to be a simple view of houses seen face on. The modern caption, like the image, focuses on Ritchey's Terrace, "first class dwellings" which were new, three-storey, brick row houses filling the middle ground. The caption treats as almost incidentally captured the one-storey, hovel-like houses in front of them, where a woman standing in a doorway might have been a laundress. Yet these humble wooden dwellings fill the foreground, acting as *repoussoirs* for the prestigious middle ground. They seem both prominent and invisible, and in this, they function like classic tropes of the picturesque in art – signs of a rough or rural life bringing an element of genre low-life to a scene, which, ironically, only an educated taste (like Armstrong's? like the Queen's?) would know how to appreciate aesthetically.

Has enough been said to encourage exploring these photographs as more than early architectural views in specific geographic locations?

The rest of the book's images offer equally intriguing ambiguities, glimpses of the more complex humanity that created the city out of both dreams and distress. There are images influenced by other images, such as the cathedral-like Filtration Plant, whose photographic "portrait" of 1952 (p. 123) mimics sacred monument photography, or the serried ranks of dressed beef in a new city abattoir in 1915 (p. 109), presented like a photograph of prize specimens at an agricultural exhibition. Their fine order reassured the public of the new safety of their meat compared to previous, private slaughterhouses.

An exploration of the "context of context" would also need to acknowledge the impact of the authors' anachronistic selections, that is, selections made because they appeal to our present taste for what strikes us as surreal or humorous. This recasts for our entertainment images, which may originally have been created and valued for their demonstration of, for example, modern standardized health practices. This serious purpose inspired the now smile-inducing views of a "forest school" set up among trees or the "open air" classroom where the students wear blankets with hoods for warmth (pp. 96–97).

This brings us to a moment of real creativity on the part of the authors – the inclusion not only of other cognate records such as maps and report pages to deepen the meanings of the photographs, but also of quotations from three creative books inspired by Toronto. The books are *Reservoir Ravine* by Hugh Hood (1979), *In the Skin of a Lion* by Michael Ondaatje (1987), and *Consolation* by Michael Redhill (2006). The quotations are meant to resonate with the images, not to describe them, and in this the authors of *Toronto's Visual Legacy* have validated the new respect accorded to the subjective in historical understanding. This refreshing poetic gesture by the authors deserves praise. It acknowledges the subjectivity of records as much as literature, and the new truth that subjectivity is not a weakness to overcome, but rather a fruitful opportunity for insight, even in, or perhaps especially in, an archives.

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