

Book Reviews

Alberta at the Turn of the Century: A Selection of Photographs from Ernest Brown, Harry Pollard and Other Photograph Collections in the Provincial Archives of Alberta. Edited by ERIC J. HOLMGREN. Edmonton: Provincial Archives of Alberta, 1975. Not Paginated. \$3.75.

Alberta Archives is to be heartily congratulated for this its second occasional publication. Those who have had the pleasure of viewing *Alberta at the Turn of the Century* in its original format as an exhibition will welcome this book as a more permanent memento and important addition to our growing national stock of archival visual publications. The book should be eagerly bought and enjoyed at leisure by thousands of Albertans. It is a must for all our archival libraries.

Alberta at the Turn of the Century presents a series of some 166 photographs by four noted Albertan photographers whose collections now form a part of Alberta Archives' extensive photograph holdings. The four photographers, Ernest Brown, Harry Pollard, C.W. Mathers, and Robert Hoare, were all professionals whose commercial interests fortunately extended beyond portraiture to documenting the full-ranged life and development in Alberta from the 1880's to the 1910's. From their vast output, Ester Kreisael of Alberta Archives selected images which give us glimpses of the fur trade, the Klondike, homesteading and ranching, coal mining, transportation, urban life, Indians and various Alberta personalities. Arvi Liimatainen's able text provides brief biographies of the photographers and their collections, sets the mood for the photographs and makes them more meaningful. The photographs themselves are technically well reproduced by Karl Kaesekamp and Jim Blower, Alberta Archives' own staff photographers. Indeed, the book, under the editorship of Eric J. Holmgren, is a fine co-operative effort, revealing good working relationships between archivists, technicians, designers, and publishers.

Furthermore *Alberta at the Turn of the Century* is indicative of a healthy developing maturity in the Canadian archival world: the realization that Canadian archives must disseminate and diffuse our heritage on the broadest scale. We must take our heritage beyond our walls. And as Alan Ridge,

Alberta's Provincial Archivist, rightly points out in the introduction to this book: "displays are an effective means of communication but are limited by their location and exhibition period, while a book not only enjoys a wide distribution to all who are interested but may be perused at leisure."

For Canadian archivists, particularly those who work with visuals, this book also serves to educate us further in our efforts to demand and obtain high standards in our research and publications. This book, like most Canadian visual publications, still falls short of the fine research and publishing quality achieved by the Americans, Europeans, and Japanese.

The research and text was, as I mentioned, able. However, it is inadequate even for a book whose main presentation is its visual content. Not all photographs are captioned. Some dates are missing. More seriously, the individual photographs are not attributed to specific photographers. The gravest shortcoming, however, is that nothing is said of the work of the photographers. We have no indication of their approaches, attitudes, prejudices, technical restrictions or difficulties. One expects to find comments on the validity of the photographs presented, their adequacy as representing reality, and the relationship of these selected photographs to the others that do exist. There are none.

The design, layout, and physical structure of the book are quite successful. The subtlety of the cover with wrap-around wallpaper and the illusion of a framed photograph hanging on a wall is an alluring and effective mood-setter for the book. The book's size is right for hand-holding and for placing on a shelf. Moreover, the book feels right. This is important, for a book is meant to be not just a visual intellectual experience, but a physical sensual one as well. The choice of paper is fine for the cover and text pages but somewhat distracting for the photographs. A smoother paper for the photo pages would have been more successful.

The presentation of the photographs has its good and bad points. Although I have no idea as to the wealth of images that were available, the selection for this book is satisfying and fairly adequate. There may be too great an emphasis on transportation and I would have liked to have seen at least several photographs of photo studios or photographers and work, but these are minor concerns. The choice of the common snapshot sizes for presentation was a wise one as it is easily recognizable to the modern viewer. The use of oval images beneath the texts carries through the cover photo dimension and provides good visual relief to the rectangular shape of the rest of the photos. For the most part, the size of each particular image suits its subject well, providing ample detail without viewer eye strain. The retention of borders around the photos to retain snapshot verisimilitude is not disagreeable and works well in this book. Whether or not the photographs were cropped from their originals we do not know and I feel that this should have been pointed out somewhere in the text.

The map on the last page of the book is an enigma. I see little purpose in its inclusion. Few will even refer to it as they either will not know it is there, will not have any need to consult it, or even if they did it is printed too dark for easy reading.

The printing quality generally is slightly above average for this type of soft-cover book but still far from fully satisfactory. The rich brown ink for the text and background of the photo pages is most effective. A fairly fine screen was used in the plate making and this gives a good tonal range to most of the photographs. But somehow we still must convince our Canadian printers to give us clear white whites and brighter highlights in their photo reproductions.

The shortcomings I have mentioned should not detract from the many positive aspects of *Alberta at the Turn of the Century* and the praise that is rightfully due to the Provincial Archives of Alberta. Alberta Archives and this book are among the pioneers of the proper presentation of archival visual documentation. We would do well to follow their example and if future archival publications are better, it is because Alberta Archives have shown the way. And from what I understand, production costs are satisfyingly low — not a minor consideration during these times of limited budgets.

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The National Archives and Urban Research. Edited by JAMES FINSTER. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974. Pp. 164. \$10.00.

This collection of papers comprises the published result of the Conference on the National Archives and Urban Research held in Washington, D.C., on 18-19 June 1970. The topic of both book and conference is immediate and relevant but the essays themselves leave me rather disappointed. They are written by a mixture of professional historians, archivists and government administrators. Basically the historians try to suggest new directions in which their research should be going, the administrators are exhaustive in describing their programs, and somewhere in between the archivists try to connect the first two by suggesting potential research sources. Unfortunately only in one panel, that on housing, does the entire theme coalesce sufficiently to provide a useful comment on archival sources as they relate to urban studies.

This is not to say that the other essays are not worthwhile pieces. Nearly all the papers in the other panels on urban population, transportation and the impact of federal activities on the American city, are provocative and