

# *More than Meets the Eye*

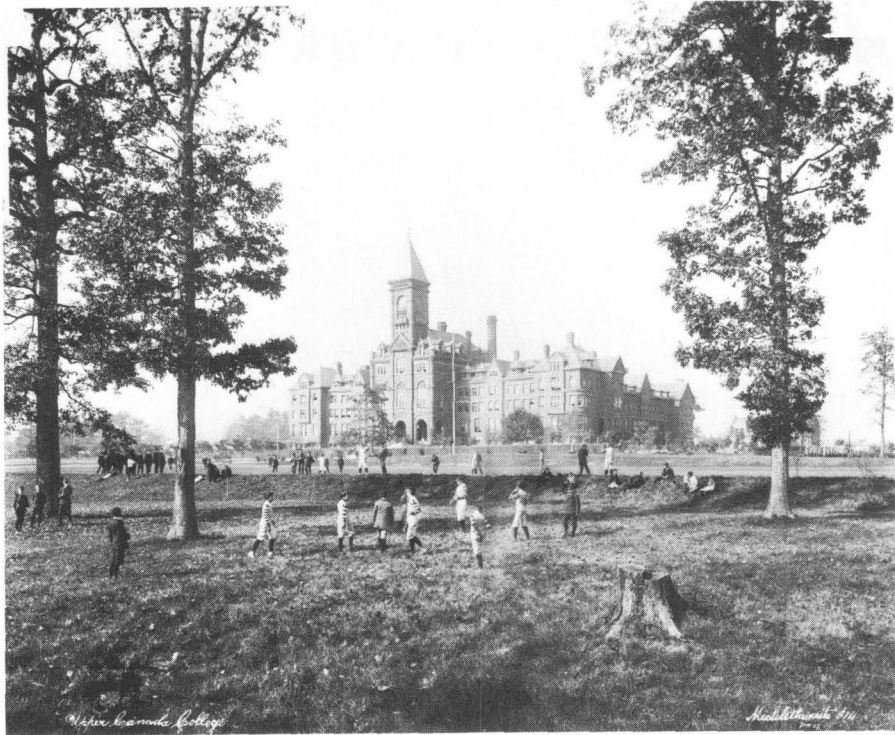
by PETER ROBERTSON

Somebody once said that the camera never lies. Those who support that generalisation include the many Canadians who, during the past decade, have used increasingly large numbers of photographs as historical documents. Sacrificing quality for quantity, they have overlooked the fact that photographs, for a number of reasons, can present a somewhat less than truthful image of the past. Surely it is time for archivists to understand these limitations and to moderate the indiscriminating attitude with which many of their patrons are approaching photographs.

Following Louis Daguerre's invention of photography in 1839, people seeing a photograph for the first time often remarked on the quality of verity. In the words of one observer, "Every object is retraced with mathematical preciseness, . . . a degree of perfection that could be attained by no other means". Truthfulness was a useful weapon in photography's protracted struggle for equality with, if not superiority over, traditional visual arts such as painting. What photographers were claiming was that photographs were able to depict the same subjects as paintings, and with greater truthfulness. In his definitive book *Art and Photography*, Dr. Aaron Scharf comments on the assertiveness of photographers, who "saw little reason why photography should not be considered as a Fine Art" and "conscious of the mechanical limitations of their medium . . . developed new, often elaborate means for augmenting the artistic content of their work".<sup>2</sup> One of the most significant "mechanical limitations" was of course the inability of nineteenth-century photographic equipment to record adequately people and objects that were in motion. Partly because of this problem and partly because of their collective desire to surpass painting, photographers tended to concentrate on subjects

1 Report of Joseph-Louis Gay-Lussac, in *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Various Processes of the Daguerreotype* (London: McLean, 1839), p. 35.

2 Aaron Scharf, *Art and Photography* (London: The Penguin Press, 1968), p. XIII.



*Boosterism:* Frank Micklethwaite's photograph of Upper Canada College during the 1890s helped spread Toronto's self-image of a prosperous, progressive city.

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that were both motionless *and* artistic, such as portraits, buildings, and landscapes.

What effect did the process of building a relationship with his clients have on the outlook of a photographer reaching for success in his profession? The client, in simplest terms, was the person who engaged the photographer to take his portrait, and who expected satisfactory results for the money thus spent. Published in 1864, the widely-used manual *The Camera and the Pencil* exhorted: "Let us never lose sight of the fact that we must, if practicable, *please all* who seek our services . . . to secure the patronage of *every visitant* . . . to promise compliance with their wishes".<sup>3</sup> Recognizing that an unflattering portrait might offend a client, photographers routinely employed people who specialized in retouching negatives. According to a textbook entitled *The Art of Retouching*, published in 1880,

<sup>3</sup> M.A. Root, *The Camera and the Pencil, or the Heliographic Art* (Philadelphia: D. Appleton & Co., 1864), pp. 90-91.



*The other side of the coin:* Taken by an anonymous photographer, this photograph shows slum conditions in Toronto around the turn of the century. Consigned to the files at City Hall, it was unavailable to contradict the image of the city spread by photographs such as those taken by Frank Micklethwaite.

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the duty of the retoucher was “to make with facility any alteration taste may suggest, such as a fixed, staring and unnatural look, assumed by so many persons while sitting for a portrait, into an easy, natural smile; or to change the forced, sinister smirk into a calm and pleasing expression”.<sup>4</sup> Retouching paid dividends, because satisfied clients were apt to return for additional portraits, and for exterior and interior views of their homes and businesses. This “portrait-home-business” sequence is present, for example, in William Topley’s photographs of the prominent Ottawa lumber barons H.F. Bronson, J.R. Booth and W.C. Edwards taken between 1880 and 1920. Judging from the examples published in the book *Portrait of a Period*, similar patterns would emerge from an analysis of the photographs taken by William Notman, the shining example of the successful nineteenth-century Canadian photographer.<sup>5</sup>

Nineteenth-century photography was not only a process struggling to rise above its technical limitations and to achieve the status of art, but also a profession striving for social and economic respectability. For example, photographers in the United States and Canada often used the purely honorary title of “Professor” to impress the public with their knowledge. Furthermore, they generally displayed an acute understanding of modern advertising techniques. Consider the following typical notice, which appeared in 1888:

There is perhaps no establishment in Port Arthur that shows more conspicuously the rapid developments and improvement in the photographic art, than that of J.F. Cooke. This studio is spacious and well arranged. The light and all other requisites for a first-class establishment are perfect. Photography, in all its branches, is here executed in the highest style of art. Mr. Cooke is an artist of rare talent and ability, and that this fact is appreciated by the public, is evinced by the large and influential patronage he now enjoys.<sup>6</sup>

Fortunate indeed was a photographer like William Topley who was able to use the title “Photographer by Appointment to His Excellency the Marquis of Lorne and Her Royal Highness the Princess Louise”. The more influential the patron, the better for business.

Having acquired a reputation with, and made money from, clients who were influential people in their community, photographers sometimes became part of the movement known as “boosterism”, a phenomenon in part manifested by the flood of illustrated brochures, pamphlets and books extolling the virtues of Canadian cities and industries during the period from 1880 to 1914. For example, Frank Micklethwaite’s photographs of Toronto,

4 J.P. Ourdan, *The Art of Retouching* (New York: E. & H.T. Anthony, 1880), pp. 12-13.

5 J. Russell Harper and Stanley Triggs, eds. *Portrait of a Period: A Collection of Notman Photographs 1856 to 1915*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 1967.

6 *The New West* (Winnipeg: Canadian Historical Publishing Co., 1888), p. 30. However, a contemporary mercantile directory stated that Cooke’s estimated capital was less than \$500 and that his credit rating was limited.

widely published in periodicals and books, document a prosperous, progressive city: bustling city streets, office buildings, banks, industries, colleges and schools, churches, spacious parks, quiet residential streets. Micklethwaite's photographs, however, present an image of the city which is accurate but incomplete—incomplete because nobody commissioned him to photograph its slum housing, neglected children, and sweated labour.<sup>7</sup>

Twentieth-century Canadian boosterism hides behind a variety of euphemistic titles: publicity, public relations, advertising, propaganda, information services, media relations. Whatever name it assumes, the concept implies the use of certain techniques by newspapers, businesses, and by organizations such as governments, to influence people's thoughts and actions. These organizations are able to employ and train photographers, to enforce guidelines or regulations stating how the photographers are to perform their assignments and, through a number of editorial processes, to determine just which photographs the public will see.

One organization which has always recruited and trained its own photographers is the Department of National Defence. The reason for this policy, according to one report, is "that the fullest and most complete control over activities and personnel may be exercised by the military authorities" and thus "not only to provide an historical record but to provide informational and inspirational material for . . . the maintenance of public morale and the stimulation of recruiting".<sup>8</sup> Drawing an example from the world of business, one notes that the vice-president of Pringle and Booth, one of the largest commercial studios in Toronto, recently criticized the tendency of photography students to use "old barns and fences" as subjects, and referred approvingly to a plaque in his firm's office reading: "We do not make pictures to hang on walls. We create photographs to be reproduced in major media to sell merchandise".<sup>9</sup>

The manipulation of photographs may take the form of an order like the one which prohibited R.C.A.F. photographers in wartime from including in their photographs subjects like the complete aircrew of an aircraft, lest that information benefit the enemy.<sup>10</sup> Manipulation is present too in the widespread use of photographs taken with wide-angle lenses in advertisements which convey a false and misleading impression of, say, the interior of a new car.

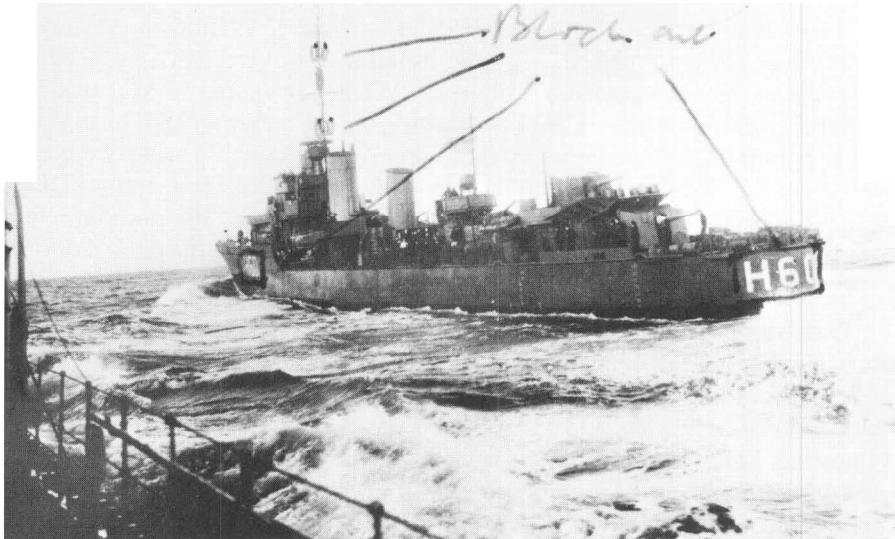
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7 The Canadian social conscience of the time was not reflected in photographs. Where were the Canadian counterparts of the American photographers Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis, whose documentation of social conditions in New York gained wide exposure?

8 PAC, Records of the Wartime Information Board, RG36, 31, Vol.16, File 9-A-6, F.C. Badgley to W.S. Thompson, 3 January 1940.

9 *Canadian Photography*, V (June 1974), p.23.

10 PAC, Sound Recordings Accession 1972-47. Henry E. Price Collection. Interview of Harry Price by Peter Robertson, 23 August 1972.



*Controlling a photograph:* censors removed both the pennant numbers and radar aerials from this photo of H.M.C.S. *Ottawa* taken in 1940, making the picture less suitable in some ways as an historical document.

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Distortion can result from the cropping or retouching of negatives and prints to delete unwanted details, such as the pennant number and radar aerials visible in a wartime negative of the destroyer H.M.C.S. *Ottawa*. Captions are another means of manipulating photographs, as these two examples will attest:

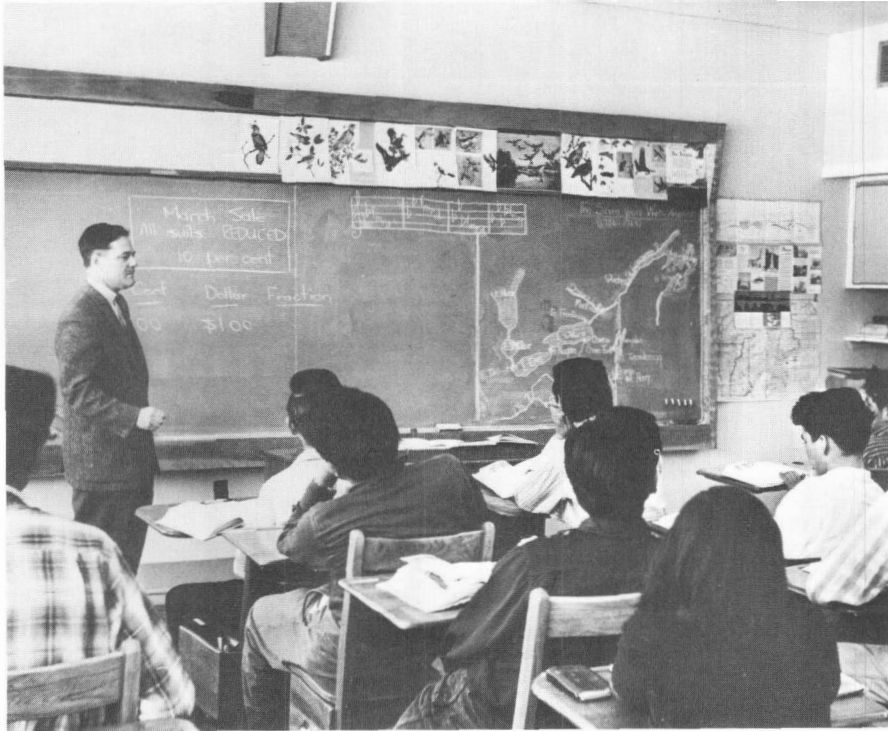
The Canadian Corps who cracked the Hitler Line in Italy were given a well-earned rest by the shores of the blue Mediterranean.

Academically, Indian students are considered to be as bright as any other group of youngsters. Here, a grade 8 class at Mount Elgin Indian day school at the Caradoc Agency . . . are at work learning geography.

Whoever wrote the first caption must have been a frustrated travel agent; the colour of the Mediterranean is immaterial, but researchers will certainly want to know the names and units of the soldiers in the photograph, the exact location and date, plus the name of the photographer. Some member

of the Information Division of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration wrote the second caption; perhaps that person should remove his foot from his mouth and stop perpetuating racial stereotypes.

The editor who makes the decision to release or not to release a photograph practices manipulation. For example, a colleague who is organizing the Montreal *Gazette* collection of some 130,000 negatives taken between 1938 and 1968 reports that an average of only one in ten of these photographs were published in that newspaper. There is also the example of the photograph showing the blanket-wrapped body of a Canadian soldier killed in Korea in 1951; branded with the rubber stamp "Banned", this photograph vanished into the files for the next twenty-five years. Even when released to the public, a photograph can present a distorted image. Many people have seen the well-known Canadian Press photograph of Robert Stanfield fumbling a football during the 1974 federal election campaign. Yet



*Distortion:* surely the phrase "academically, Indian students are considered to be as bright as any other group of youngsters" influences the information conveyed by this photograph!

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*What the public did not see:* the blanket-wrapped body of a soldier of the 2nd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, killed in Korea on 3 November 1951.

Public Archives of Canada C-70696

how many people noticed the photographer's subsequent statement that, of the many photographs he took on that occasion, the one selected for national exposure was the one showing the only time that the leader of the Progressive Conservative Party fumbled the ball? Other photographs inflicted upon the public may be described politely as re-enactments and impolitely as fakes. The most notorious examples are Captain Ivor Castle's photographs which purport to show Canadian troops in action during the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Bearing captions like "A Canadian Battalion go over the top", these photographs appeared in both official and popular histories for over fifty years, symbolizing Canadian participation in the First World War. It was one of Castle's colleagues, William Rider-Rider, who supplied the evidence which finally destroyed their credibility:

These alleged battle pictures were 'made', or rather pieced together, from [photographs of] shell bursts taken at a British trench mortar school outside St.





*Re-enactment or fake?:* officially captioned “A Canadian Battalion go over the top, October 1916”, Captain Ivor Castle’s photograph actually shows Canadian troops in training at school far behind the front line.

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Pol, and those taken at rehearsal attacks of men going over the top with canvas breech covers on their rifles . . . [consequently] I had a lot to live down when I visited some units . . . [such comments as] “Want to take us going over the top? Another faker?”<sup>11</sup>

We are now observing the proliferation of re-enacted photographs as a byproduct of the current nostalgia boom throughout North America. A number of individuals and groups in the United States are producing early photographs like daguerreotypes and tintypes showing, for example, people dressed in Civil War uniforms. There is a group in Toronto which specializes in recreating and photographing scenes characteristic of the nineteen-forties, prompting one observer to comment, “This is a possible

<sup>11</sup> PAC, Sound Recordings Accession 1972-27. William Rider-Rider Collection. Interview of William Rider-Rider by Peter Robertson, 18-19 May 1971.

future direction for photography . . . perhaps the staged, created photograph will be the wave of the future".<sup>12</sup> Certainly the potential exists: so realistic were publicity photographs taken during the filming of the television documentary *The National Dream* that some have already appeared in textbooks passing as actual illustrations of the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway.<sup>13</sup> Because of their careful attention to period detail, re-enacted photographs may well pose problems of authentication for archivists in the near future.

Those researchers who lack discrimination perpetuate the careless use of historical photographs. Far too many researchers are content to compile a sheaf of photostatic copies of photographs already used in other publications, and then to mail these to the National Photography Collection as a request for more copies of the same. The result is further exposure of those tired old visual clichés. If only researchers would make the effort to choose from the full range of photographs available on their particular subjects, either through visits or through detailed letters asking for assistance! Other researchers, representing publishing companies or television networks, appear armed with a long list of every person, place and event mentioned in their assigned manuscript or program script. As long as they obtain one photograph matching every item on this list, regardless of its suitability, these people are satisfied. Frequently, researchers do not realize that cameras have not been on the spot recording every single event in Canadian history for the past one hundred and forty years. A classic example of this misconception was the representative of a well-known publishing company who persisted in asking for photographs of the sinking of H.M.C.S. *Fraser* in 1940, apparently unaware that the ship sank a few minutes after a collision which occurred in the middle of the night—hardly the time for a photographer to stand around recording the scene. Whenever photographs of a subject do not exist, researchers often resort to the questionable practice of using photographs taken out of context, using the rationalization that nobody will know the difference. The author of a recent British book faced the necessity of using out-of-context photographs by writing captions clearly stating that "although a photograph of such-and-such an event does not exist, this photograph taken on a different occasion shows the same conditions."<sup>14</sup> Canadian picture researchers should treat their audience with the same honesty.

Archivists are the people who enjoy direct contact with collections of original negatives and prints. What can we do to understand the limitations of the photographs in our custody, and to promote their intelligent use as historical documents? We can approach photographs with an ever-skeptical

12 Robert Fulford, "A Journey in Time", *Saturday Night*, Vol. 91 (March 1976), 58.

13 Statement by M. Omer Lavallée of CP Rail, Montréal, Que., March 1976.

14 Martin Middlebrook, *The Nuremberg Raid*. London: Allen Lane, 1973.

attitude, aware that something which is both old and a photograph is not necessarily an objective document. We can study photographs for evidence of the various types of distortion and manipulation mentioned in this article, and can check captions for accuracy and objectivity. We can learn as much as possible about the photographer who took the photographs, either through research into textual sources or through personal interviews: his qualifications, his attitudes, his economic status. We can communicate all this information to the public by stripping away the layers of misinformation from photographs, by bringing complete collections of photographs, bearing accurate and complete captions, into public view, by giving impartial advice to researchers, by making speeches to organizations and by publishing articles about our research, and by critically reviewing the use of historical photographs in all media.<sup>15</sup> Archivists can and should spread the message that there is more than meets the eye in a photograph.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Richard Huyda's review of the books *Macdonald: His Life and Times* and *The John A. Macdonald Album* in this issue of *Archivaria*.

## Résumé

Trop souvent, pour trop longtemps, la photographie a été utilisée sans discernement comme une technique de représentation exacte de la réalité, sans que son authenticité ne soit jamais remise en question. Il est temps que l'archivistique devienne consciente des limites de ce *medium* et que l'archiviste aide l'utilisateur à exercer un certain degré de critique des sources. Dans cet article, l'auteur s'attache principalement à décrire les problèmes de l'appréciation des limites de la technique, comme l'utilisation de la couleur et la nécessité au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle de choisir des sujets stables, de l'évaluation des intentions du photographe, qu'il soit artiste, publiciste ou simplement journaliste partisan, de la recherche du faux et de la reconstitution historique. En conclusion, l'auteur énumère quelques suggestions susceptibles d'aider l'archiviste et l'utilisateur de matériel photographique à réaliser que les apparences sont parfois trompeuses.