

Private Realms of Light: Canadian Amateur Photography, 1839-1940

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Through extensive research, acquisition, exhibition, and publication activities, archivists of the National Photography Collection at the Public Archives of Canada have recently unearthed a wealth of information about amateur photography in Canada. Because the photographic work of gifted amateurs is the purview of all archives in every region of the country, this experience and research seemed worthy of wider dissemination. Accordingly, Archivaria commissioned a triptych around the theme of amateur photography: the relationship of research and acquisition to the exhibition, "Private Realms of Light"; an overview of the exhibition concentrating on the technical and aesthetic changes of the various periods of amateur photography, together with detailed, analytical captions to accompany the sample photographs from each period; and, finally, a commentary/ reflection on the exhibition itself. It is hoped that this collage will inform and stimulate archivists everywhere to pursue the legacy of the amateurs and ensure its archival safekeeping.*

From Acquisition to Exhibition

by **ANDREW BIRRELL**

Acquisition of important new collections of historical documents is probably the most exciting part of our job as archivists, particularly when we are aware that the find may open new doors of understanding. The equally significant task of preparing the documents for use by researchers is mundane in comparison. None will deny that these are the twin foundation stones of our profession, yet all too often our vision of our rightful duty stops short at that point. A major acquisition is an event to be celebrated beyond the walls of our humble institutions and, by not taking or making the opportunity to announce to a larger world what we have found, we miss the occasion of enriching society at large and indirectly of publicizing what archivists do. I have always felt that the work and study that goes into acquisition and the preparation of research tools should be used in as many ways as possible. In many institutions, time and the number of employees are significant and limiting factors, but the extra effort put into publicizing, writing, or exhibition will frequently yield

unexpected returns in further acquisitions. The exhibition, "Private Realms of Light," which is discussed elsewhere in this issue, began about five years ago as an acquisition project in the National Photography Collection of the Public Archives of Canada. From the outset, however, we were aware of the possibility of extending the acquisition to include an exhibition and perhaps even a book.

The project was the result of an attempt in the PAC Archives Branch to define an acquisition policy and of a managerial requirement in the Acquisition and Research Section of the National Photography Collection to change the photographic acquisition programme. A byproduct of the work on an acquisition policy was the fashioning of a three-year acquisition plan by each of the divisions involved. One area selected for photography was the broad one of amateur photography. Our own research and the work of others had shown that, from the earliest announcement of photography in 1839, amateurs had played an important role in the technological and artistic development of the medium, and it seemed reasonable to assume that Canada's experience would have followed that of the United States and England which have always been potent forces in our history. The few collections we had from amateurs showed points of view very different from those of professional photographers. While often technically inferior, the work of the amateur frequently concentrated on personal interests which, as historical documents, supplemented and expanded on the work of the professionals. For example, Henry J. Woodside's Klondike photographs reveal the everyday life in that region instead of concentrating on the more sensational aspects of saloon life and the gold-bearing creeks. He presents a Dawson showing the interiors of homes and offices and their ordinary inhabitants relaxed and unguarded (Figure 1). It was our hope, then, to find more



Henry J. Woodside, "Sun Office Dawson 1900." Among other occupations, Woodside was for a time the editor of the Yukon Sun. Here, as elsewhere, his camera was a constant companion. Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada (PA-16923).

collections like that of Woodside as well as substantial pictorial and manuscript evidence of organized camera club activity in Canada. These we expected to be somewhat different with emphasis on composition, technical control, experimentation, and debate. All this we knew in theory. It remained to test the theory through research and then acquisition.

The project presented an opportunity for all the archivists in the Acquisition and Research Section to take an acquisition through all the stages. Properly handled, the project would not only uncover significant photographs, but also provide valuable experience to each staff member and serve as a unifying bond for the Section as a whole. The first step required that the boundaries of the project be defined. We already knew the general shape of amateur development from an international perspective. While there was undoubtedly considerable amateur activity in Canada during the wet-plate era (up to the early 1880s), we felt that we were unlikely to add greatly either to our knowledge or to our holdings by spending time on this period. However, there was a tremendous growth of public interest in photography from the early 1880s following the widespread availability of the gelatin dry-plate. No longer did the photographer need the knowledge of a chemist, the dexterity of a magician, and the patience of Job. The revolution was completed later in the decade with George Eastman's introduction of his famous Kodak camera with its motto "You press the button, we do the rest." Obviously, the 1880s were a logical starting point. The termination date of 1940 was chosen much more arbitrarily. Our knowledge of more recent photographic history was scant; however, we supposed that the war would have curtailed most photographic activity and acted as a natural chronological break. Furthermore, it roughly coincided with the revolution introduced by the 35mm format.

The project was divided into four periods (1885-1900; 1900-1914; 1914-1930; 1930-1940), each with an archivist assigned to it. The steps of the work plan were straightforward: a literature search to discover the most useful books, journals, and newspapers and where they were to be found; a three-month research phase culminating in a brief report summarizing the main events of the period, relating them to the Canadian scene, and presenting from the accumulated photographers' names a short list of the most important for each period; a twelve- to eighteen-month search for the individuals or their descendants in an effort to locate and acquire any surviving examples of their work; a final report indicating the degree of success in locating and acquiring collections, and analyzing the relative success or failure of the project in each period. Since there was always the possibility that we would find insufficient information during the first stage, the reports would allow reflection and termination of the project in its early phases. Midway through the acquisition stage, we felt we would be in a position to know if there were sufficient photographs and information to warrant an exhibition and a publication.

Early in the summer of 1978, each of the archivists began research in earnest in runs of photographic journals. The National Photography Collection already owned an excellent selection of major nineteenth-century journals plus the records of the Toronto Camera Club. These were supplemented by the literature held by the National Gallery library. In addition, it was considered necessary to examine the rich holdings of the New York Public Library, the Kodak Park Research Library (Rochester, N.Y.), and the Metropolitan Toronto Library. This research was even more rewarding than expected. It yielded several thousand names of photographers

and research notes filling thousands of 5x8-inch cards. The ensuing reports briefly outlined the *distinguishing features of the photographic scene in Canada* for each period and presented an abbreviated list of the most promising collections based on the response of contemporaries. As expected, the greatest revelations came from the post-World War I period, where our knowledge had been meagre.

The acquisition stage, initially a year, was later extended by a year owing to the interruptions of other work and the growing success in acquisition. The methods used to trace individuals were fairly uniform, concentrating at first upon city directories and telephone books. Naturally the earlier the period, the less satisfactory this was, and consequently other tools such as obituaries and death certificates were called into play to yield the names of descendants. Using these resources, Peter Robertson, who had amassed a list of 946 photographers for the period 1885-1900, resolutely began the hunt. Once contact had been made with a photographer's family, many more sources of information and material flowed from it. As a result, approximately 10 per cent of the total list was tracked down and, of those, 25 per cent yielded collections of interest.

The flowering of the camera club movement in Europe, Britain, and North America was the outstanding characteristic of the 1880s and 1890s. Analysis of club membership lists in Canada revealed that this tended to be a middle class phenomenon embracing those whose interest ranged from a simple joy in taking photographs in the company of like-minded people to those who spent a great deal of time and care in creating their photographs. The following decade proved pivotal, for it introduced to Canada the contentious concepts of photography as an art in its own right. While this was no new debate, the direction given it by movements like the Linked Ring in England and the Photo-Secession in the United States was. The main outlines of this development in Canada were known already, but Lilly Koltun was able to add considerably to our understanding and our holdings. The most prominent of the country's pictorialists were Arthur Goss, Harold Mortimer-Lamb, and Sidney Carter. The collections of the first two were already available in the Toronto City Archives and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, respectively. Of Carter there was almost no trace save a few scattered prints. The usual sources had yielded a blank.

Following a lengthy search aided by the Montreal directories, Koltun found a promising lead only to have it evaporate. Returning to the directories, she then began to trace Carter's neighbours hoping that some of them, if found, would remember him and lead her to his children. Several neighbours were found, but none was able to help. Finally, doggedly following the spoor of these neighbours, she encountered a woman who was able to tell her that the son was in Connecticut and the daughter in Vancouver. From the Carter children, who were then easily traced, we received not only information, but a collection of almost five hundred prints documenting the whole of Carter's photographic career (Figure 2). As dramatic and important as the acquisition of the Carter material was, the single largest discovery of the project focused attention on the collection of another internationally known photographer. However, every project has its heartbreaks and we have been unable, up to this point, to acquire this outstanding collection of original negatives, prints, correspondence, and diaries.

As expected, the greatest gains came from the period following 1920, since that was where we had been most deficient both in knowledge and collections. Many of



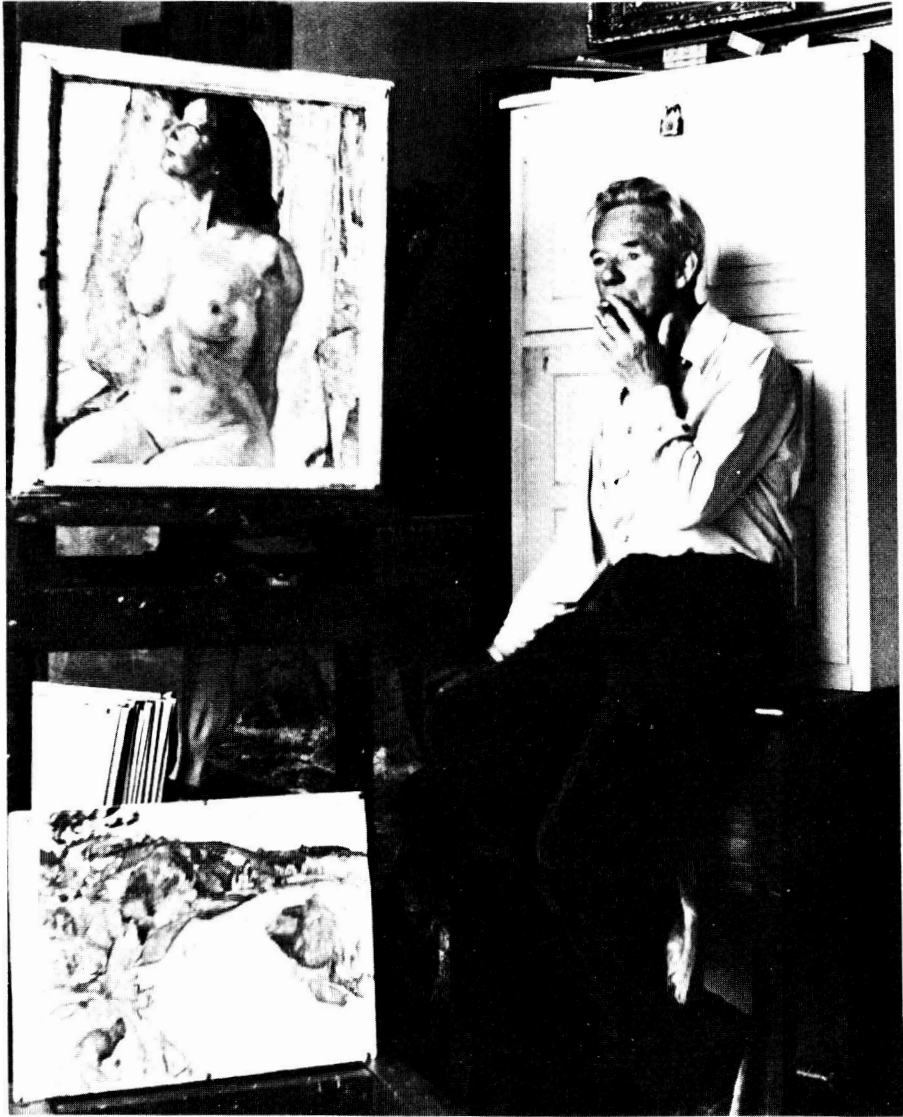
Sidney Carter, Unidentified woman, 1908. The contrived pose, soft focus, and unconventional approach were the antithesis of professional portraiture of the time, and were hallmarks of the Pictorialist tradition. Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada (PA-111979).

the photographers active in the twenties and thirties were still alive and were able to direct Andrew Rodger and Joan Schwartz to others about whom little or nothing was known. In addition to acquiring collections and taping interviews with these photographers, Rodger and Schwartz were able to obtain good runs of some periodicals, large numbers of salon catalogues, some club records, and, occasionally, personal records as well. What began as almost uncharted territory gradually gave way to an increasingly familiar landscape, and results continue to flow in though the project has officially ended. (Figure 3).

Though all who participated agreed the project was a success, it was obvious to us that, in spite of the acquisitions, some of the objectives were not met. The chief disappointment was the failure to find the strongly personal documentary photographs like those of Woodside mentioned earlier. The major reason for this lay in the sources that we used. Photographic journals were primarily oriented to organizations like the camera clubs, and both the journals and the clubs from the turn of the century were largely bound by the Pictorialist aesthetic. Hence, any of the photographers we discovered in the magazines were usually those who were active in exhibiting in the abundant salons. The result was a closed circle which produced a great many collections which clearly documented the aesthetic history of the club movement, but seldom provided personal photographs or images which reflected the world in which the photographers lived. We were aware of this danger at the outset and had hoped to have sufficient time to explore other sources as well. However, since none of the journals had been surveyed before, it was necessary to do this part of the work thoroughly because it had an importance that transcended the immediate project. Photographers like Woodside, whose work was seldom if ever published, leave almost no public trail of their interest and it is exceedingly difficult to learn of them.

A second disappointment was the rather lopsided geographical representation of the material we acquired. Club activity was greatest in Ontario and for the whole period we found that, although there were significant clubs and groups as well in Ottawa, Hamilton, and London, the Toronto Camera Club was the largest and most energetic of these. Developments in the West were slower until the metropolitan areas became well established. References were found to short-lived clubs in cities like Winnipeg, but there was no continuity. French-speaking Quebec was particularly poorly represented both in Montreal and Quebec City, and one is led to conclude that clubs were dominated by the English and that French enthusiasts operated independently. Certainly it is unlikely that recognition of the work of francophones would appear in the journals which were all produced in England and the United States. It is unreasonable to assume that the blank in our knowledge indicates that Quebec produced few amateur photographers, leaving this area open for further research.

A rough estimate of the items acquired shows more than twenty thousand photographs, hundreds of them salon prints, many medals, some manuscript material including early club records, and numerous salon catalogues and periodicals. It is ironic that several of the amateur collections already in our possession were individually larger than the total acquired through the project. However, the importance of the new collections cannot be measured simply in quantitative terms. Far from leading to the conclusion that there remained little to collect, the results suggest that there are still large and important collections awaiting



William A. Norfolk, Frederick Varley, Doon School of Fine Arts, Doon, Ontario, c. 1950. Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada (PA-121970).

the attention of archivists. In fact, it was the unanimous opinion that when the project ended the material acquired represented only a tiny proportion of what still awaits recovery. That at least is the archivist's fervent prayer.



Surrounded by the exhibition, "Private Realms of Light," Brian Coe (second from left) discusses his book on cameras with Roy Flukinger (left), Gordon McLeod and his wife, Helen, and John Fleetwood-Morrow and his wife, Jane. Coe, Curator of the Kodak Museum, Harrow, England, and Flukinger, Curator of Photography, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, were two of the speakers at the one-day symposium, "International Perspectives on Amateur Photography." McLeod and Fleetwood-Morrow were amateur photographers during the 1930s; their work was acquired by the National Photography Collection in the course of the project and appears in the exhibition. Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, 23 September 1983. Courtesy: Public Archives of Canada (C-105803).

When the acquisition was finished, we could see that there was more than enough in our research and collections to support an exhibition; the management of the Archives agreed. I have always felt that we have an obligation to make available to the public the results of the research we carry out; to do so, we prepared a book-length catalogue to accompany the exhibition. This publication will reproduce the exhibition in full, present an introduction to the development and changes in

amateur photography in Canada, and, most important of all, provide full literature and photo bibliographies to enable others to take up where we have stopped. The exhibition also spawned a one-day international symposium (Figure 4) and attracted considerable publicity on a national level, including a feature article in *Saturday Night* and an interview on “Canada AM.”

The project was an unqualified success. There are few thrills like finding an altogether new collection and few satisfactions to match successfully negotiating for such a collection. To such triumphs the archivists involved with this project were able to add the exhilaration of a successful and complex exhibition, a polished educational event in the symposium, and a permanent useful record of the new knowledge gained in a worthwhile publication. Such multi-faceted activity can only be good — for the archivists themselves, for the archives’ collections and public image, for the discipline of archives, and for future research in the history of photography.