

Review Article

Pictures for People and Pundits

by RICHARD HUYDA

Old New Brunswick: A Victorian Portrait. Photographs selected by RICHARD VROOM. Introduction by Arthur Doyle. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978. 142 p. ill. ISBN 0 19 540293 6 \$16.95.

A Picture History of Alberta. TONY CASHMAN. Edmonton: Hurtig, © 1979. 215 p. ill. ISBN 0 88830 157 X \$15.98.

A Picture History of Ontario. ROGER HALL AND GORDON DODDS. Edmonton: Hurtig, © 1978. 224 p. ill. ISBN 0 88830 163 4 \$15.98.

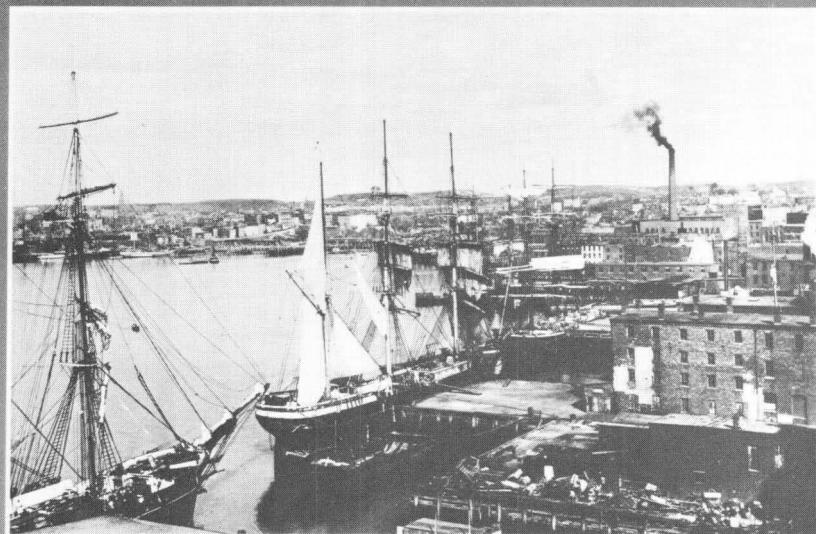
Expectations from books entitled 'a picture history of . . .' or '... a Victorian portrait' are generally not very high. Such volumes have usually been inadequate series of poorly reproduced illustrations accompanied by superficial commentaries on historical complexities and meaningless, irrelevant notations about the pictures. Sometimes they are compiled by traditional historians with little appreciation for visual records; sometimes by nostalgic picture makers with little respect for historical integrity. Most often they are produced by authors mindless of the pundit's demand for scholarship, yet shrewdly aware of the attraction of such books to a general reading public who are willing to pay a modest sum for something easy to read with plenty of old pictures—poorly reproduced or otherwise. Picture histories are usually published by firms whose sole motivation is to profit from this plebian attraction. The three books reviewed here are part of this tradition. Fortunately, they are sufficiently different to indicate that the quality of Canadian illustrated histories is improving.

Richard Vroom, of Loyalist stock and a professional photographer, offers *Old New Brunswick: A Victorian Portrait* as essentially a photographic perspective of the province during the period from 1860 to 1918. He has selected 123 of the best images by nineteenth century New Brunswick's documentary photographers. Vroom's brief preface, marred by some inaccuracies, is a good simple text which acquaints the reader with New Brunswick photographers and tells something about their careers and collections. It is enhanced with a brief and lively introductory text (by Arthur Doyle) which provides a backdrop for Vroom's photograph selections. Appropriately, Doyle notes that lumbering served as the foundation of Victorian New Brunswick's economy; seventy-five percent of the population depended on that industry. He then takes us on a tour across the province, weaving a textual panorama of life and progress from the port of Saint John, along the Saint John Valley, through the interior forests, along the North Schorg, the Mirimachi, then eastward and back south to the border communities of St. Stephen and Milltown. The province emerges as a place of relative contentment and stability in spite of its economic difficulties. New Brunswick society was simple yet diverse. Its population held tenaciously to values of hard work, thrift, self reliance, respect for property and rights, unquestioning Christian faith and loyalty to established traditions and institutions. Grim economic realities may have dominated their working lives but, as Doyle points out, there were still times for simple recreation in this age of "peace, faith and simple optimism".

Peace, faith and optimism are also recurring themes in *A Picture History of Alberta* and in *A Picture History of Ontario* where introductions are followed by picture series and complementary texts. Each book has some four hundred illustrations carefully selected

OLD NEW BRUNSWICK

A Victorian Portrait



Photographs selected by RICHARD VROOM • Introduction by ARTHUR DOYLE

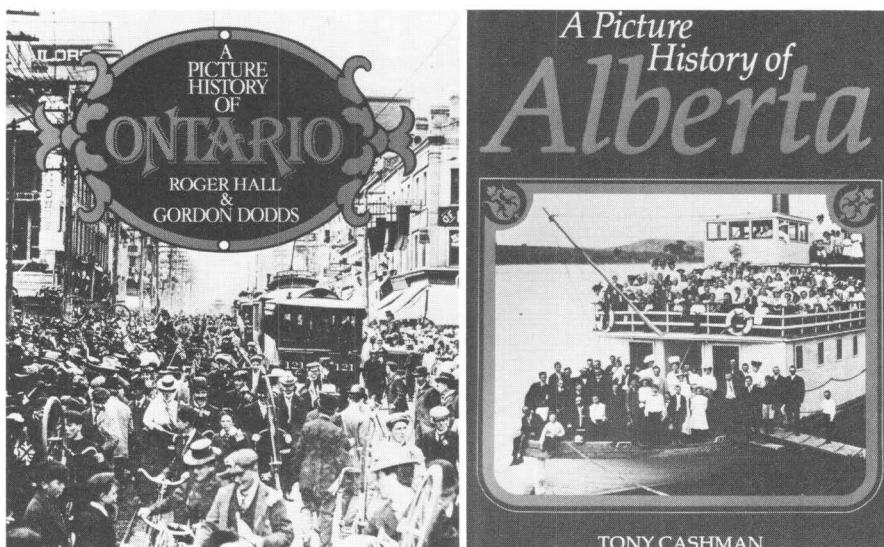
from the rich visual holdings of numerous Canadian archives—tapping, in particular, the photographic wealth of the Glenbow-Alberta Institute and the hitherto seldom used James Collection at the Toronto City Archives. *A Picture History of Alberta* uses a thematic approach: it begins with the fur trading empire of the early nineteenth century and ends with a glimpse of ‘bigtime’ Alberta today. It is also a pleasure to read. Tony Cashman, a born raconteur, has a spirited conversational style. His ‘yeasty humour’ which, as the dust jacket states, pervades the book is used to great advantage in creating and enhancing the perspectives of Alberta’s past. His introductory remarks are very brief. He explains the nature of visual evidence, particularly the strengths and limitations of photographs. He affirms that his approach is to allow the pictures to speak for themselves—“in fact, that there should be no text as such, but a progression of pictures bound by interlocking captions”. The book jacket for *A Picture History of Ontario* claims that it “is the best possible short history of Ontario, told in first-hand visual images”. The authors, Hall and Dodds, would make no such pretentious claims. Their intention is to present a “bare-bones account” of Ontario’s history, a task they find easier to do in pictures than in words because for them Ontario’s identity is more show than tell. The book develops out of the authors’ belief that from an eighteenth century beginning until shortly after the Second World War a singular society found its roots in the province and fashioned a unique outlook on the world. Old Ontarians wrapped themselves with a deep sense of loyalty, tory attitudes, a love of politics, and maintained a healthy balance between city and country. After 1945, Ontario fell and was pushed into the mainstream of North American society, its death knell sounded by the demise of Leslie Frost’s government in 1961. Hall and Dodds choose to present their view of Old Ontario chronologically with a lengthy narrative introduction followed by three picture and text sections: Upper Canada, Canada West, and Ontario.

Demonstrating their scholarly knowledge of the province's past in academic fashion, however, does not impede their ability to present a story in a concise and lively fashion. A somewhat plodding start rapidly transforms itself into a crisp, conversational style. Interest is maintained even while ploughing through the boring, but seemingly necessary, political litany which all Ontario historians feel obliged to recite. It's refreshing for example, to see the War of 1812 described as "the breeding place of Canadian heroes", William Lyon McKenzie as a "camouflaged conservative", and Sandford Macdonald as "Sir John A's designated hitter." Hall and Dodds write for today's audience. They have no illusions that their book is to be the definitive tome; its objective is to teach, inform and please readers who will appreciate occasional comparisons of past events with current issues. The Mowat—Macdonald confrontations are seen as similar to the Lesvesque—Trudeau duel, early Ontario provincial rights issues parallel today's in Quebec and Alberta. A good example of the author's ability to balance scholarly commentary with interesting reading and an indication of their satisfaction with Ontario's past is their final introductory comment: "Wedged in between automobile service centres and fast-food outlets, Old Ontario is still there—and it is that Ontario that this book is chiefly about."

Proper selection is critical to any illustrated history for it is the basis of historical perception, the graphic outline of past realities. An author's role is to present illustrations within their context, carefully defining their authenticity, meaning, and evidential content. The visual record like the textual must be interpreted and presented within its historical framework, evaluated on its own merits and in relationship to other surviving records. *For Old New Brunswick: A Victorian Portrait*, Vroom had access to some of the best advice on New Brunswick photography. He also had access to the best collections—in particular, those housed at the Provincial Archives, Provincial Museum, and the Wilson Studio at Saint John. His selection records the grand themes of sea and forest, the proud display of visible wealth, the technological and industrial progress, the trappings of civilized gentility, the reverence and enjoyment of nature, the solemnity of important events, and the moments of relaxation and recreation. There is little evident sadness or hardship—even the photographs of the ruins in the aftermath of the great Saint John fire of 1877 evoke a sense of endurance and majesty. The selected photographs are from the works of Isaac Erb, Olé Larsen, G.T. Taylor, J.Y. Mersereau, and Father Joseph Courtois—men proud of their province and of their own talents and responsibilities as photographers. Vroom has done them justice. In addition to choosing interesting subject, with the practised eye of the professional he has retained only those photographs of good composition, proper exposure, and processing, such as Erb's superb view inside the hull of a schooner under construction in Saint John. He is fortunate that so many have survived over the years in relatively pristine condition.

As a former Alberta newsman and an experienced author who has already produced an illustrated history of the prairie provinces, Cashman should be able to deliver a meaningful and interesting visual package for *A Picture History of Alberta*. He does. His selection contains both instructive historical evidence and elements that are visually intriguing and stimulating. Photographs, both amateur and professional, predominate: posters, engravings, painting and drawings are used sparingly but effectively. Cashman's approach is based upon a clear understanding of the nature of visual evidence—its truths and deceptions, its breadth and depth of information as well as its limitations. Periodically, he reminds the reader of the disparate values of visual records either by the use of comparative images or by a narrative commentary. The illustrations are well organized into compact, comprehensible units; for example, the section on homesteading is a tight grouping of photographs showing the pioneer from the moment of his arrival on the site to his dream's fulfilment of a permanent frame home. His approach to urban documentation is novel and fascinating. Using the concept of a guided tour he presents insights into lifestyles of the major and smaller Alberta centres. Throughout the book

individual images exude vitality and excitement, youthfulness and pride. If one were to fault Cashman in his selection it would be for his preference of pictures showing progress and happiness. There is neither sadness nor tragedy—even the images of the dust storm and the relief lines of the Dirty Thirties take on a surreal aura and the famous photograph of the Albertan hopping the freight train appears in heroic proportions. Perhaps that is as it should be. *A Picture History of Alberta* is meant for today's proud and happy Albertans whose historical perspectives need not be complicated with the harsher realities of the past.



In *A Picture History of Ontario* one might expect the authors, whose expertise is more attuned to textual evidence, to have less command over visual records. Fortunately, Hall and Dodds demonstrate some sophistication in their selection of illustrations. They do have an awareness of the unique nature of historical visual evidence. They rightfully chose items contemporaneous with the period under review and avoided the inclusion of images of peripheral or indirect value. With access to the major Ontario and national archives, many choices were available. Therefore, they could afford to bypass overused, mundane items and fill most of the sections with sufficient and satisfactory selections. Many of these historical records appear for the first time in publication. However, in a few cases the authors did have difficulty either finding or selecting images. Choices for the period 1867-70 indicate their frustrations and the unsatisfactory results. It is curious that they could not or chose not to illustrate "the quiet, broad residential streets stacked with a fat, contented Victorian middle class" that they so graphically describe in their narrative. On the other hand some illustrations go unmentioned in the main text but speak for themselves, such as the excellent selection of manuscript reproductions plotting didactively homesteader George Moot's efforts to secure title to his land. The choice of a full page enlargement of a Père Marquette Railway ticket and use of various types of documentary art is also well done. Wisely, the authors consistently use head and shoulder portraits. The section on Edwardian Ontario ranges from some superb photograph selections to others that are irrelevant, incongruous or of abysmal quality. These inconsistencies in picture selection detract from what is on the whole a thoughtful and informative choice of pictures.

However, there are two glaring omissions by the authors in their discussion of the illustrations. They consistently fail to identify and discuss the picture makers, their perspectives and objectives. They also fail to be more analytical about the illustrations they have selected. That Hall and Dodds are capable of doing this is quite evident in their observation on a Bainbrigge watercolour:

"In August of 1838, at the height of the rebellions in Upper Canada Philip John Bainbrigge painted this unusual scene of isolated figures aboard a St. Clair River ferry pulling across the American side near Amherstburg. The juxtaposition of figures suggests a switch from conventional art depicting Upper Canada—frequently the draughtsmen's sketches of bored British army engineers stationed in the province. Bainbrigge himself an army officer, is subtler and in a way has captured the mood of the colony. The figures seem suspended in mid-stream; it is difficult at first to determine who is steering the ship and in which direction it is going".

Such is the quality of scholarly effort necessary for first-rate illustrated histories and worth dozens of other selected images and lines of text. Hall and Dodds do not maintain the same effort consistently throughout their book. Tony Cashman on the other hand, in his *A Picture History of Alberta*, consistently puts considerable thought and effort into the balance between illustration and text. His captions provide details to identify and complement the illustrations, they often refer to the artists and photographers creating the images. Cashman is well aware of how the creator's prejudices, preconceptions and particular purposes influence the illustrations. He knows also that illustrations contain information beyond the visible elements; information which sometimes deserves comment. For example, one page has two illustrations concerning Canadian Indians. The information contained in the top item which is a reproduction of caricature in the *Prairie Illustrated* is quite self-evident. The second illustration appears to be a simple photograph portrait of an Indian outdoors. Cashman writes:

There is truth in the cartoon, but the greater truth is that the Indian has become an outsider in his own land. A desolation of spirit comes over him and lasts nearly a hundred years.

Photographer Randolph Bruce seems to have captured it all. It's 1893 or 1894. A Blackfoot stands outside a white man's fence and gazes off into a distance in which there is no horizon.

This extract is representative of Cashman's perception, skill and style. It is this quality of writing and knowledge combined with a good understanding and use of Albertan pictorial records that make *A Picture History of Alberta* a worthwhile volume.

The relationship between illustration and text is not of the same importance in *Old New Brunswick: A Victorian Portrait*. Supporting captions are minimal in length. Only the most essential identifying information as to place, date, activity, and name of photographer is given without commentary. The author meant the illustrations to speak for themselves—delivering their impact and information with clarity in a purely visual context. For this to happen, books have to have fine reproductions, finely printed in formats and layouts that show the illustrations to best advantage in their full integrity. Contributing archives, museums and studios made a special effort to provide fine quality reproductions for this publication. Such a situation is still rare in Canada. Access to original negatives is a limited privilege because the risks of damage and accelerated deterioration of the fragile plates and films are too great. Therefore when the privilege is given, one expects that the author and publisher will produce a book worthy of that privilege. Vroom and Oxford University Press have made a valiant effort. *Old New Brunswick: A Victorian Portrait* in format and design attempts to respect the integrity of the nineteenth century photograph. The 10" by 8½" page size lends itself well to repro-

duction sizes approximating those of the original plates and prints. There is no evidence of inordinate cropping, reduction, or enlargements. The Oxford University Press plate-makers and printers have succeeded in retaining much of the original clarity in the highlights and the subtle detail in the shadow areas of the images. However, their attempts to duplicate the original tones by using a consistent brown hue in the inks, although generating a sense of age, barely approximates the true tones of the originals and rather creates an overall impression of muddiness. The use of a black border around each image further detracts from the intended authentic reproduction of the originals. This distraction is heightened by the too-bold type face chosen for the captions. Fortunately, these shortcomings are somewhat offset by the sensitive and competent layout work which characterizes the book. The photographs are juxtaposed in careful harmony or complementary contrast. There is no imbalance or disparity between images, each retains its unique integrity and impact. Moreover, wise layout decisions in some instances create visual deceptions which momentarily combine two images to give impact and meaning beyond that of the single photographs, yet allowing each one also to convey its individual information. The views of fish plants at Dalhousie and Caraquet—one taken circa 1900 by Isaac Erb, the other taken about 1895 by Olé Larsen—are a good example of this distinguishing feature.

Technical production is also a distinguishing feature of *A Picture History of Ontario*. Unfortunately, it is too often a negative one. The Hurtig publishing team of editors, designers, and printers were far from consistent in their contributions. Masterful, sensitive layouts are followed by disastrous conglomerations effectively defeating the authors' intentions and selections. The explanation may be the design team's misconception that, when necessary, illustrations can be and should be forced to fit the page even if the illustration loses its impact, information and integrity or destroys that of others on the page. When such forcing is not necessary, the design team does a commendable job in presenting the authors' selections such as for the units on Simcoe, the War of 1812, and for the unit on Oliver Mowat's Ontario. They've done a good job of presenting the portrait tableau of Upper Canadian personalities of the 1820s, effectively used the split image technique for the view of Guelph, and adeptly balanced several different landscape views. The last twelve pages of the book also show good organization. But for many other areas in the book poor layout and design diminish and destroy the impact and information of the illustrations. For example, in the units dealing with the Loyalists and the Beginnings, and again in presenting the view of the Octagonal House at Ameliasburg, the reception of Prince Arthur at Brantford and the picnic at Choates Wood, it is obvious that the designer failed to understand the relative importance of the various images. Another design fault is the decision to place the institutional credit lines as little textual appendages clinging to the sides of the illustrations. These are most distracting and could easily have been incorporated into the main text, as too the occasional supplemental captions which also hang in suspension around some pictures. Hurtig should have exercised greater editorial control to ensure that the authors and designers understood each other, the information they were trying to convey, and the limitations imposed by the very nature of the book. As a parting comment on design, layout and control I can only express the hope that the disastrous presentations of "Mr. A. Currie's house" and some subsequent pages can be attributed to the wee beasties and 'printers devils' and not to a level of publishing immaturity which still prevails with some books of this type. And what of the reproduction and printing quality which are the hallmarks of fine illustrated histories? Without good photographic reproductions printers cannot be expected to produce the necessary printing screens, negatives or plates required for good printing. If they have these, along with good paper and inks, they should be capable of producing illustrations which are close reproductions of the originals. Alas, the printers of *A Picture History of Ontario* obviously lacked some of the essential ingredients.

Hurtig's publication of Tony Cashman's *A Picture History of Alberta* suffers from the same malaise although a year's experience appears to have brought some small technical improvements. The annoying institutional credit lines have been removed as appendages to the illustrations. Printing quality has improved slightly. However, with the exception of a few fine reproductions such as that of the Wainwright shack, pictures still appear muddied and heavy, lacking proper contrast and liveliness. Readers acquainted with the originals will be disturbed by the lack of impact in the reproductions. They will be further aggravated by the erratic sizing of the illustrations. The necessity of putting four hundred pictures in a two hundred page book of manageable proportions was obviously restrictive. The design team was hard pressed to feature appropriate image formats not infringing upon the integrity of the originals. Difficulties arise when reductions are done disproportionately, without due consideration of the effect of sizing upon the particular item and upon contiguous illustrations. To arrive at a proper balance requires a skilled and sensitive design team; the one for *A Picture History of Alberta* tried hard but was only moderately successful. The fault is not entirely theirs because Hurtig failed again to exercise proper editorial control. Careful review would have eliminated items which cannot be properly reproduced; for example, an extremely poor portrait of Lucien Boudreau MLA imports no useful information and succeeds only in downgrading accompanying material. The author surely could have been persuaded that the design and printing limitations of such illustrations would detract from his otherwise excellent selection. Only Hurtig's technical shortcomings prevents *A Picture History of Alberta* from being 'history at its most delightful' as the dust jacket proclaims. Even Cashman's spirited humour does not dispel the murkiness of the reproductions or the distractions of poor layout. Albertans deserve quality treatment of their historical riches. Undoubtedly they'd be proud to pay a reasonable premium for a better Hurtig publication.

These three illustrated regional histories deserve space on the Canadian archivist's bookshelves since they make for good reading and are handy reference books for identifying pictures. They do reveal some of the richness of our visual heritage; unfortunately, they do not establish commendable printing or publishing standards for this kind of work.