

Alexander Henderson: Nineteenth-Century Landscape Photographer

by STANLEY G. TRIGGS

Alexander Henderson was a well-known nineteenth-century photographer whose views of Canadian landscape, city scenes and outdoor activities received the highest praise at home and abroad. They were eagerly sought both by Canadians and visitors to this country as records of places or events seen, or simply for the artistry of the images themselves. At least one farseeing Montreal lawyer collected them avidly for their historical value. Yet for close to seventy years after Henderson's retirement in the late 1890s, this varied array of images, once so popular, were all but forgotten and his vast collection of negatives left neglected in the basement of a Montreal house.

Henderson imbued his photographs with an unusual response to his environment, both rural and urban, and a sensual passion for nature and the wilderness. His beginnings in Scotland help provide an understanding of the uniqueness of his work and the source of his inspiration.

He was born in 1831 to a family of comfortable means and well-established social position.¹ His family owned "Press Castle" and its accompanying large estate southeast of Edinburgh; here Henderson spent his youth. Situated near the Tweed River and not far from the North Sea, amidst the setting for Scott's epic poem "Marmion," it offered constant challenges to an active and imaginative youth. Here were woods and hills to explore, craggy mountains to climb and crystal streams in which to test his skills as a fisherman. Later his uncles took him on many fishing trips to the great salmon rivers of Scotland.

In this romantic setting as a member of a close-knit family, young Henderson's life seems to have been idyllic. The beauty of nature and its physical challenge became his abiding love throughout his life, and later he combined these sensibilities with photographic trips into the Canadian wilderness to

¹ Henderson's grandfather, Sir Alexander Henderson of Press, was a wealthy nurseryman and seed merchant, prominent in civic and commercial affairs. He was first chairman of the National Bank of Scotland and Lord Provost of Edinburgh. Sir Alexander's wife was the sister of Sir Thomas Mills who as a young officer served in the regular army under Wolfe at Quebec and Amherst at Montreal. Mills was later Receiver-General of Quebec, a post he held until 1789. The photographer's father, Thomas, continued the family success in business and the public life of Edinburgh, inheriting "Press Castle" and the accompanying 650 acres of farmland. An uncle of the photographer, James Mack, farmed this land and as a painter, must have influenced the photographer's early development.



Henderson Family in Notman Studio, 1859-60. William Notman stereograph. Seated: *Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Henderson and their two oldest children.* Standing: *Probably Alexander's brother William, or Mrs. Henderson's brother.* (Notman Photographic Archives)

produce a superb record of customs now long gone, and an inspiring document of wild rivers now reduced by civilization to placid streams.²

Even the death of his father when Alexander was nine years old did not for long disturb his pastoral peace, for he was soon taken under the wing of his uncle, Eagle Henderson, who apparently also lived at Press. The uncle seems to have been an able foster parent providing Alexander with a combination of kindly guidance, discipline and freedom which inspired much love from the young man. It was Uncle Eagle who took him on many of the beloved fishing trips, and who worried himself sick at such times, for example, when on a rainy night the boy daringly crossed the swollen river Tweed to save a few miles home. It was he who sent the nineteen-year-old youth to London in 1851 to see the Great International Exhibition where, absorbed by this exciting and first of all international exhibitions, he stayed two full weeks until his money ran out. Such trips to England and no doubt to the Continent, complemented by the family interest in art, gave the young Henderson a sound cultural appreciation before he sailed for the New World.

The only unsettling aspect of his youth which is apparent was the family's insistence that he take up accounting. While Henderson seems to have had the necessary skills for that occupation and a sincere desire to please his family, his personal papers leave the impression that he found his studies tedious and that he longed for some more creative vocation. At least once he abandoned the idea of becoming a chartered accountant but resumed his studies at his family's urging. After the preliminary training he entered an apprenticeship contract in 1849 for three years with the Edinburgh accounting firm of Maitland and Woods, after which he became a qualified accountant.

In October 1855 he married Agnes Robertson, a daughter of old family friends, and emigrated to Canada a few days later, arriving in Montreal in the same month. He brought with him numerous letters of introduction to bank presidents in Toronto and Montreal. Henderson must have found the situation in Montreal encouraging for he chose to settle there rather than in Toronto; however, no record has been found of what he did for a living or for whom he worked during the first three years. From 1859 to 1863 his name appears in MacKay's *Montreal City Directory* as a Commission Merchant, apparently self-employed. He and his wife lived at 3 Inkerman Terrace on Drummond Street in a fashionable new area which was developing west of the main business district. Close to the markets and theatres, and only a few blocks from his office, the area had a special appeal for someone raised on a large country estate, for it was surrounded by fields and orchards and had a magnificent view of the St. Lawrence River. On clear days the tiny figures of men working on the first piers of Victoria Bridge could be seen.

The Hendersons were both endowed with inheritances which enabled them to enjoy the fashionable activities of the day. During their first winter they spent a lengthy holiday in Quebec City where they hired a sleigh to join the throngs travelling over the frozen St. Lawrence River to Montmorency Falls for the thrill of tobogganing down the ice cone formed by the freezing spray.

² See reminiscences in letters written around 1910 to his daughter Polly about his youth in Scotland and early years in Canada. Alexander Henderson Papers, Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, Montreal.

They made weekend train trips to the Eastern Townships, summer holiday voyages by steamboat to Cacouna where they rented a cottage, and, of course, Alexander's special love, fishing trips by sailboat to the Saguenay nearby.

When in December 1861 the 3rd Battalion of the Volunteer Militia Rifles (The Victoria Rifles) was formed, Henderson was one of the first to enlist.³ The unit was raised in response to a fear of invasion stirred by tensions between Britain and the Northern States during the American Civil War. Membership in the Victoria Rifles and other volunteer battalions was popular among upper-class young men wishing to demonstrate their patriotism and courage. Henderson became a Captain on 28 February 1862, but there is little known of his service.

Henderson's introduction to photography and its techniques is a mystery. In the absence of contrary documentation, it is possible that he developed his interest in photography during his years as a student in Scotland. Photography may even have been the distraction which his correspondence hints at when he writes on several occasions that he has decided to return to his studies. On the other hand, the possibility that he learned it after coming to Canada is suggested by the twelve-year lapse between his arrival and his turning professional. What is certain is that by September 1859 he had joined the Stereoscopic Exchange Club, a group of photographers brought together in April of that year through the pages of a London photography journal, *The Photographic News*, for the purpose of exchanging stereo views by correspondence to help improve the art of stereoscopy. Henderson was the first North American member.⁴ Only one stereograph by him from this period is known to exist: a stereo-half of the summit of Beloeil Mountain near Mont St. Hilaire, Quebec. This was collected by David Ross McCord in 1903 from George Henderson, the photographer's son. On the back of the card in Alexander's hand is written "Taken about 1858."

The earliest known photograph by Henderson with a firm date is a copy of a print signed by him and dated on the negative, 1859. It is a winter view of Montreal looking almost directly north from Windmill Point near the west abutment of Victoria Bridge. The original was probably made from a whole plate. Both the stereo-half and the copy of the print are in the Notman Photographic Archives.

In 1865, Henderson published the first major collection of his landscape photographs. Five copies of the book are known to have survived: one is held in the National Gallery of Canada, one in the Boston Public Library, another in the Notman Photographic Archives, and two at the Public Archives of Canada.

The copy in the Notman Photographic Archives has a cover titled "Canadian Views and Studies by an Amateur," and "Photographic Views and Studies of Canadian Scenery" appears on the title page. This hardcover volume measures thirteen by eighteen inches and includes ten photographs

3 McCord Museum, "Victoria Rifles of Canada, 1861-1961," unaccessioned scrapbook.

4 *The Photographic News* (London), 9 September 1859. Proposal first presented on 18 March 1859.

with short titles but no text. The prints are mounted one to a leaf and they approximate whole-plate and five-by-seven-inch sizes. "Timber Jam on the Rouge River" is the only dated photograph, being inscribed on the negative AH 63 (in reverse on the print). The other copies of the book contain twenty photographs, each with variations in subject and some difference in titles.⁵ The work was probably a small limited edition and may have been made individually for each purchaser, which would explain variations among the five surviving copies. The importance of the publication is that it is the earliest body of photographs from which we can evaluate Henderson's work. Here is no struggling beginner, but rather a talented, serious amateur. Each print reveals exceptional technical and artistic skill. It must have been a personal milestone and may have encouraged him to devote his life to the art as a professional.

In 1866 or 1867, he gave up the security of his accounting career to open a studio at 10 Phillips Square, advertising himself as a portrait and landscape photographer. Portraiture must have been a minor part of his business since so few portraits appear in collections. He undoubtedly employed some staff in the studio and possibly hired an assistant for field trips. Nevertheless, judging by the consistency of style throughout the photographs attributed to him from this period, it seems probable that he took all of the pictures himself. In 1874, he moved to 237 St. James Street, this time referring to himself as landscape photographer; two years later, he took up his final location at 387 Notre Dame.⁶

His numerous views of city life revealed in street scenes, buildings and markets are alive with human activity and though his favourite subject was the landscape, he usually composed his scene around such human pursuits as tilling the soil, cutting ice on the river, or paddling a canoe down a woodland stream. A sufficient market existed for these scenes and others depicting the lumber trade, steamboats and railways to make it possible for a skilled photographer to make a living. There was little competing hobby or amateur photography prior to the 1880s because of the costs, cumbersome equipment and time-consuming techniques. Therefore a photographic souvenir of a trip or a gift for relations was usually bought from a professional photographer. In 1879, the nieces of John Molson, a prominent Montreal businessman, commissioned Henderson to prepare an elaborate album of several hundred prints for their uncle's birthday. Catering to this market, he published an album in 1870 of stereo halves titled "Photographs of Montreal." It was of simple format, containing a title page and list of contents, followed by twenty photographs, one to a page. The only known copy is housed at the Public Archives of Canada. The title page announces "a similar book of winter views also published," no copies of which have yet been located.

Stylistically Henderson's work conformed to the documentary tradition which predominated in the nineteenth century. Photography was still new; the

5 The title of the one in the National Gallery of Canada is "Views and Studies Photographed from Nature," and in the Boston Public Library, "Photographic Views and Studies of Canadian Scenery." The Public Archives of Canada's copies are entitled "Canadian Views and Studies by Alex. Henderson" and "Canadian Views and Studies by an Amateur."

6 *Lovell's Montreal Directory*, 1876.

camera's remarkable ability to portray minute detail appealed to an age in which realism was the dominant trend in both landscape photography and portraiture. Nevertheless, within this realistic approach, Henderson's use of light, texture and meticulous composition are hallmarks of his work, carrying it far beyond the average of his contemporary landscape photographers. His attention to people engaged in various activities makes his photographs invaluable to the social historian, and his renderings of architecture are more than just usefully factual, for they are more like portraits, animating brick and stone.

In the late 1870s and the early 1880s some of his work took on a more personal style. What had before been a tendency toward the romantic became at times a complete abandonment of realistic portrayal for a direct emotional reaction to the scene confronting him. To archivists and social historians these images are not always important as historical records but they certainly are powerful views.

Henderson travelled widely throughout Quebec and Ontario and made several trips to the Atlantic provinces and Labrador. In a letter from Halifax to his wife in 1872, he raised the possibility of moving to that city in order to open a business; however, he abandoned the idea, mostly, one suspects, because of the cold and damp weather. At about this time, he also travelled to the Lower St. Lawrence where he photographed various construction projects on the Intercolonial Railway (ICR), such as the stone pillars of the Trois-Pistoles Bridge and the nearby Great Clay Cutting. These probably led to a commission in 1875 from the ICR to photograph the principal structures along the almost completed line connecting Montreal to eastern Quebec and the Maritimes.⁷ The Public Archives of Canada has a very fine collection of these views including bridges, tracks, cutbanks and tunnels.⁸ While some of these photographs are exciting, in general they do not represent his best work. The restrictions of commission work hampered him. He needed freedom to excel.

A decade later, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) contracted him to work in the West.⁹ The freedom he had on this occasion shows in his photography for he was left to interpret the land as he felt it. In April 1892, he accepted a position as Manager of the CPR Photography Department with duties which included spending at least four months in the field.¹⁰ That year he took a trip westward and photographed extensively as far as Victoria, BC. Few photographs from the trips of 1885 have been found in collections, but those that have are exceptional. The Notman Photographic Archives has four prints from 1885 and eight positively identified from the 1892 trip, with five more attributed to him. A recently acquired enlargement (nineteen by forty-four inches) of the great glacier of the Selkirks may also derive from the later excursion. Although he spoke again in 1897 of going west, there is no record of this trip having been undertaken.

7 Public Archives of Canada, RG 11, Series III, Letterbook Vol. 733, Letter no. 117, 25 May 1875. S. Fleming to Ralph Jones.

8 PAC, National Photography Collection, Accession no. 1936-272.

9 Montreal, CPR Headquarters, CPR Special Collections, Commissary note, 1885.

10 Notman Photographic Archives, Alexander Henderson Papers, Letter from D. McNicoll, General Passenger Agent, CPR, Montreal, to Alex. Henderson, 29 January 1892.

In his outdoor work Henderson used various sizes of negatives: five-by-eight inches, 6¼-by-8¼ (whole plate), eight-by-ten, eleven-by-fourteen, and stereograph. He may also have worked in other sizes, such as four-by-five, and five-by-seven inches. Not enough dating of his photographs has been completed to indicate when he started using the various sizes, but it is probable that the eleven-by-fourteen-inch format was not used until the 1870s. The earliest photograph in the Notman Photographic Archives from that size negative is 1875.

His preferred negative process was the collodion wet plate. In the 1850s he used paper negatives,¹¹ and he also made several attempts at collodion dry plate photography early in his career¹² and again in 1875 when photographing the Intercolonial Railway.¹³ He may have switched to gelatine dry plates after 1880 when technical improvements made it a more practical process, and generally accepted by photographers. His prints are almost invariably albumen.

Henderson retired from professional photography in the late 1890s. No photographs have been identified as his after this period, indicating that he left his work completely. Although there is a great volume of letters deriving from this retirement period, there is no mention of photography except when his son, an engineer in Africa, begged him to go to Notman's to have a good portrait taken since the one he had just received in the mail was so poor. After that, nothing. It is as if Henderson had never been a photographer. Certainly his family put it out of their minds, and there is not even a mention of his photographic activities in any of the obituaries written on his death in 1913. His grandson many years later dismissed him as an amateur photographer and got rid of Henderson's life's work with the help of the Westmount garbage service. The garbagemen were slipped five dollars each for their trouble.¹⁴

The only known existing negatives by Alexander Henderson are the eight perfectly preserved five-by-eight-inch wet plate negatives which form part of the Henderson collection in the Notman Photographic Archives. These were commissioned by David Ross McCord, founder of the McCord Museum, and are of McCord's house and grounds "Temple Grove" on Côte des Neiges Road. He apparently bought both the prints and the negatives which became part of his vast collection of Canadiana, duly entered in the accession books.

I first encountered Henderson's work on assuming the administration of the Notman Photographic Archives in December 1965. There were a few prints lying around the McCord Museum at its McGregor Street location in the old Hodgson House. They were not outstanding examples of Henderson's work, but they aroused my interest enough to search for prints in various junk shops

11 *The Photographic News*, 21 October 1859, pp. 82-3.

12 *Ibid.*

13 "A photo taken at the Jacquet River Bridge in New Brunswick has the notation 'parts of injured dry-plate' on it, (PA 22114A). Again, at 'New Mills,' Henderson comments on his 'dry-plate failure' (PA 22092)." PAC, National Photography Collection, Martha Phemister, "The One-Eyed Devil: A Collection of Nineteenth-Century Photographs from the Sandford Fleming Collection," (research paper, ca. 1974), p. 31.

14 Personal conversation with Judge M. Hyde, 1977.

and bookstores. As exciting items turned up during the next two years, the great artistry of Henderson became increasingly evident.

When the McCord Museum moved in 1968 to a new location on Sherbrooke Street, all photographs held by the Museum were transferred to the Notman Photographic Archives. These astonishing collections of photographs, accumulated during more than fifty years by David McCord, establish him as the first Canadian collector of photographs on a large scale. This mountain of images by many photographers included several hundred Henderson prints of different sizes and in various states of preservation. With the addition of two impressive albums, one from a donor and the other purchased, the collection of Henderson photographs became truly representative of the artist's work and worthy of serious research. But there was still one very important gap; no one knew anything about Henderson's life except what could be gleaned from the brief entries in the Montreal directories. Then I had the good fortune of meeting the Honourable Judge Miller Hyde, a lifelong friend of Thomas Greenshields Henderson, the recently deceased grandson and very last direct descendant of Alexander Henderson. Furthermore, the Judge was also the executor of the Henderson estate. Once he was convinced of the importance of the research, he transferred to the Archives everything of any bearing on Henderson's life.

Letters, apprentice contracts, school certificates, marriage licenses, baptismal records, wills, auction lists, land titles, trust fund minutes, water colours, family crests, and a page from the family Bible are but a sample of the more than five hundred items in the collection of documents, some of which date back to the late-eighteenth century. The whole was contained in a green metal document case belonging to Henderson's grandfather, Sir Alexander. Judge Hyde was also instrumental in having a silver medal won by Henderson transferred from another institution to take its rightful place alongside the photographs and documents.¹⁵

The Henderson collection now contains the above documents, eight glass negatives of the McCord house and grounds, and approximately eight hundred prints. Most of the loose prints have been matted and are stored in solander boxes in metal cupboards. Other loose prints remain unmatted because they are mounted back to back on pages of former albums taken apart by dealers whose own concerns usually take precedence over those of the archivist. These pages are stored in boxes interleaved with Domtar's one-ply archival matt board. The rest of the prints are contained in albums and portfolios which are also in solander boxes.

Some dating of photographs has been completed, mostly from internal evidence such as costume styles or the dates of construction of buildings and bridges. When Henderson entered business, he numbered his photographs, inscribing the number onto the emulsion of the glass plate. Enough of these numbered photographs have been dated to allow the approximate dating of other numbered works. Nevertheless, this system of dating has its pitfalls, for

15 Throughout his career, Henderson was a frequent contributor to exhibitions, his most notable achievement being the receipt of a silver medal from the Paris Exhibition of 1878, presumably for his landscape photographs.

occasionally Henderson extracted a negative from earlier unnumbered files, created as an amateur perhaps ten years earlier, and gave it a number making, for example, an 1859 photograph appear to have been taken in 1872. No systematic copying of prints has been started. Time allows only for the preparation of a copy negative when a client requests one for publication. At that time two prints are made, one for the client, and one for insertion into the working file.

Of the many thousands of photographs which Henderson made, there are disappointingly few that have been preserved in public institutions. The National Gallery, the Public Archives of Canada, and the Archives of Ontario have small collections of prints. Auctions have recently stimulated an interest in his work and some modest collections are now in private hands.

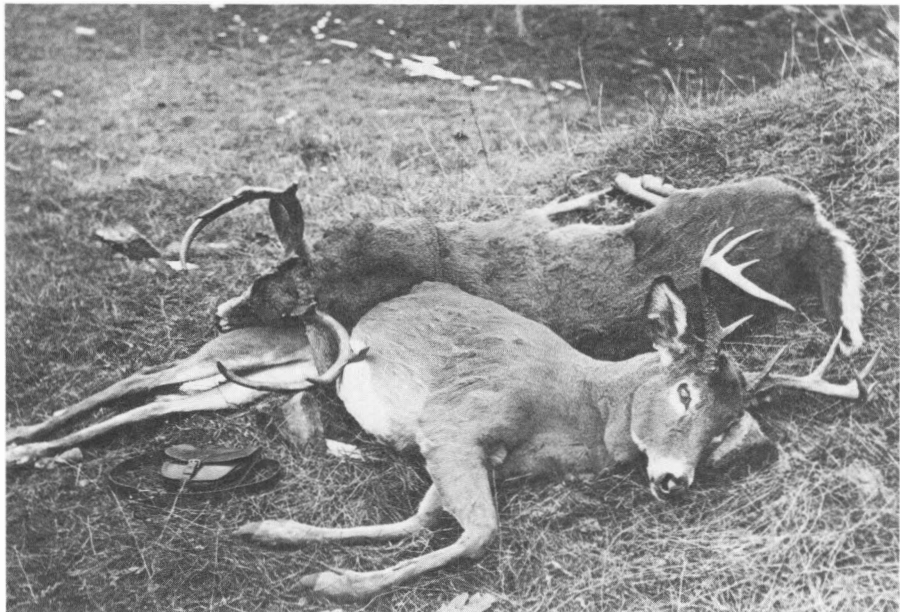
In 1973 an exhibition of Henderson's work was staged in the Notman Gallery of the McCord Museum. Twenty-two prints were hung in the modest space afforded by the gallery. With such a small number of prints a retrospective was not possible, so the theme was compressed to include only some of the more symbolic and poetic aspects of his work. The result was a tight and cohesive presentation. A number of important prints have been acquired since then and vital information accumulated. Because interest in Henderson's work is now high, another show in one of the larger McCord galleries is planned.

The value of photographs in research, in education and in bringing the past to people is inestimable. How lucky we are to have had the sensitive mind of Alexander Henderson to document three decades of the nineteenth century for future generations. Although he worked in the style of realism common amongst his contemporaries, it was a realism intensified by the force of his personal vision. He knew the value of light and used it boldly to create depth and moods, making the photographs no mere recordings of fact, but rather moving documents of the land. What makes his work unique among the landscape artists of his period is the way he sometimes suggests that a rock is not just a rock, nor a dead deer only a lifeless mound of flesh, but symbols of the tide of life and death, the mystery of time and man's eternal probing to understand.



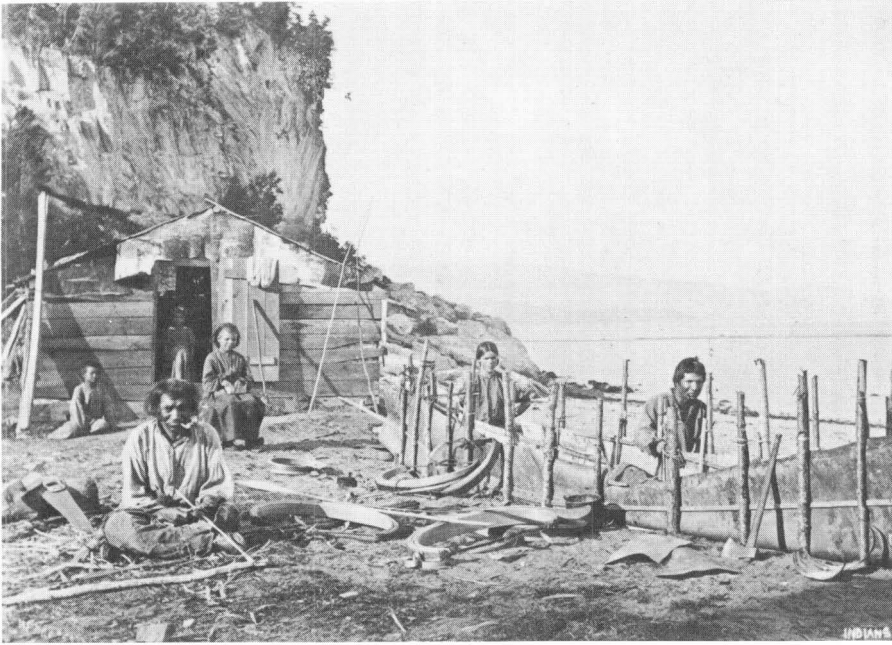
Spring Inundation. Bank of St. Lawrence River, Before 1865. Alexander Henderson. From "Canadian Views and Studies by an Amateur." (Notman Photographic Archives MP 352)

Regulating Dam, Blanch River, Derry, Quebec, probably 1866. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives MP 267)



Ready for the Portage. Rouge River, Quebec, 1863-65. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives MP 307)

Canadian Deer, probably 1870s. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives MP 187)



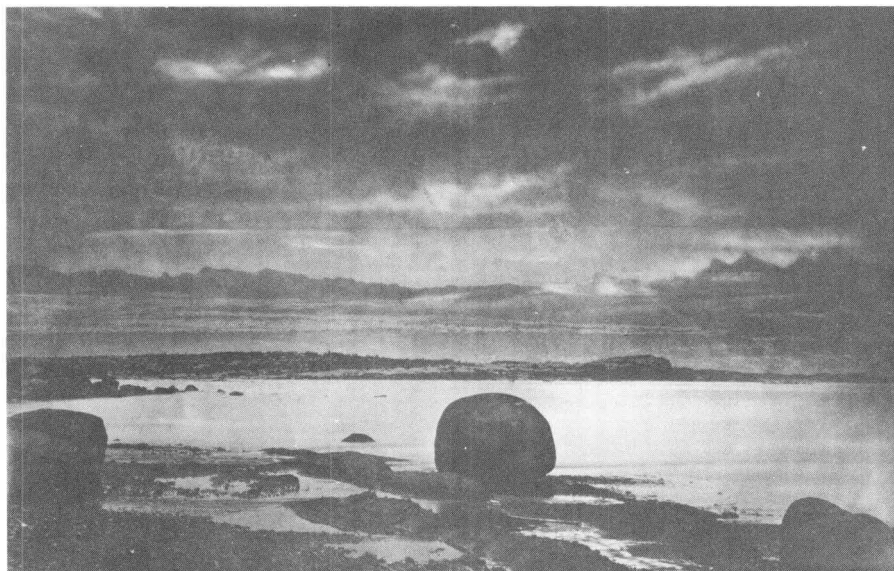
Indians Making Bark Canoe. Lower St. Lawrence River, 1865-75. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives MP 260)

At Pointe Levi, near Quebec, ca. 1870. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives MP 318)



“Temple Grove,” Home of David McCord on Côte des Neiges Road, Montreal, ca. 1872. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives)

Victoria Bridge from Notre Dame Cathedral, Montreal, ca. 1873. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives MP119/74)



Ice Cone, Montmorency, 1876. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives MP 299)

“Evening,” Metis Beach, 1875-80. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives)



In Beaver River Valley near 6-mile creek, CPR, British Columbia, 1885. Alexander Henderson. (Notman Photographic Archives MP 141/76)