

**Matthew G. Dyce**

*“A Critical History of Early Photography in Northern Alberta”*

The arrival of photography in Canada during the mid 19th-century parallels the emergence of a conceptual backdrop: ‘modernity,’ which many historians have employed in explaining major changes occurring then in Western culture and society. As photography’s unchallenged ability to convey reality altered visual culture and modernized ‘ways of seeing,’ developments in Canada revolved around this new and unfolding power of representation. Representation holds that the objective truth of an image will always be hidden behind what the photographer intended and also includes the theoretical framework within which an image may be read or ‘decoded’ by a viewer. In examining the cultural and historical currency possessed by visual reproductions, this study will show how cultural meaning is derived, negotiated and reciprocated through the outcomes and uses of photographic production and reproduction.

The Canadian government serves as a perfect example of the employment of the power of images. Scholars have studied how photography glamorizing the immigrant experience in the west served exclusionist and colonialist settlement initiatives. More recent work has used amateur collections to add to the historical picture of settlement societies, or the relationship between natives and whites in the colonial era. My research examines the connections between state or corporate photographic narratives of western Canada in the late 19th-century, and those produced by the settlers themselves. How did the settlers represent, through photographs, the collision of the national settlement dream and the reality of homesteading in the harsh climate of northern Alberta? Photography, as Raymond Williams reminds us of all technologies, is not ‘democratic’ nor is it a neutral venture. Who were not able to tell their stories? And how did those who were successful choose to present their experience? That is, what reciprocity is there between the federal government and the immigration department’s visual propagandizing, and the experience recorded by immigrants? In undertaking to circumscribe much larger discourses of colonialism and the social history of western Canada, my interdisciplinary approach will engage current historiographical debates between historians of Canada, geographers studying settlement patterns, art historians studying the connection between environment and expression, and cultural theorists who study the nature of communication, arguing over what meaning –if any– a photograph can retain and transmit between image-maker and viewer.

Many community holdings in Alberta contain documentation and the material history collections of North West settler families. The National Archives, in close proximity to Carleton, houses documents relevant to immigration history and, more specifically, the CN Rail photographic collection has recently been endowed to the Museum of Science and Technology. In examining all these collections, the goal will be an informed historical reading of the photographs’ location in time, with a sensitivity to the ‘unwritten’ notions of space and attitude which they contain. This study obviously raises questions about the validity of images as historical evidence. Questions regarding the danger of romantically ‘gazing’ into the past, or concerns over using the malleability of meaning in photographs to alter their message in order to suit the present, will be duly addressed.

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I am currently completing course work in historiography and historical practice at Carleton University while preparing to write my M.A. thesis under the supervision of Dr. A.B. McKillop. Apart from the great opportunity to work with this distinguished scholar and forthcoming departmental chair, there are a number of advantages within the Department of History that serve my research particularly well. These include faculty member Dr. James Opp, a Canadian social historian who shares an interest in the history of photography. The department is home to two research units specifically relevant to my topic, the Carleton Centre for Public History directed by Dr. David Dean and the Carleton Centre for the History of Migration directed by Dr. Bruce Elliott. The M.A. Program in History is also conducive to interdisciplinarity, providing the opportunity to take courses in Canadian photography with Dr. Andrea Kunard and Dr. Carol Payne from the Department of Art History.

Even though I had mused about graduate studies for as long as I can remember, the idea was truly crystallized for me through the inspiration and example set by my colleague and mentor, John Wadland, professor of Canadian Studies at Trent University. I was impressed to see the difference that a committed educator can make in someone's life. Dr. Wadland also showed me the important role a university plays in not only exporting academic knowledge to the wider community, but in listening to what the community can tell us about the plurality of the Canadian experience. Similarly, it was during my undergraduate years at Trent that I discovered an interest in visual culture. I came to realize that a critical study of photographs demands a vast reconsideration of the history of Canada, and that there is still much to be discovered and written. My particular interest in the history of northern Alberta developed over several seasons spent treeplanting in the region. I will be applying to doctoral programs at Queen's, Carleton and a number of schools in western Canada beginning in September, 2006.

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