

This is Not a History of Canadian Photography

A review of *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada*, ed. Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard, Montréal & Kingston, London/Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011

By Cheryl Simon

Less a history of Canadian photography, more a Canadian history told through photography, *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* considers how photographic representation is deployed to shape identity. Co-edited by Carleton University professor, Carol Payne and Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography curator, Andrea Kunard, the book represents the most extensive contribution to scholarship on Canadian photography in more than twenty years and may be one of the most important. Including reflections on historical and contemporary practices and contributions by archivists, art historians, artists, curators and artist-curators, the collection of essays brings together what have otherwise been distinct disciplinary practices and so gives a comprehensive shape to the field of Photographic Studies in Canada for the first time.

The editors take pains to underscore that this is not a history of Canadian Photography. Indeed, what distinguishes this compilation of writing on Canadian photographic practice from most previous incarnations is that it proceeds from the understanding that History, like Photography, shapes its subjects through complex representational means. The Canadian-ness of visual expression is not given in advance, an extrusion of some essence to be discerned in the photograph, but a value produced in discourse, photographic and otherwise. Indeed, in both content and form the book involves a highly self-reflexive interrogation of history making. Framed by reflection on historical practice itself, the introductory and concluding chapters situate the publication within a history of writing on Canadian

Photography. Likewise, the book's three thematic sections begin with a contribution exploring the use of photography in unreflective exercises of national building and end with a study discussing alternative or critical responses to such historical production.

If not a history proper, a distinct historical narrative can be discerned in the book's principle focus on Canada's colonial past. Although not presented as the singular story of Canadian history, the majority of the contributions here chronicle the political shaping of Canadian identity as enacted through and in photographic representations of Indigenous peoples, from the ethnographic projects commissioned during the colonialist era to the critical rejoinders of Aboriginal photographic artists in the present day. Indeed the collection is framed by a dialogue around the role of photographic representation in the production of the "imaginary Indian".

Joan M. Schwartz's essay on German photojournalist, Felix Man's 1933 picture story of Canada inaugurates *Part 1: Visual Imaginings* and also builds the conceptual foundation for the book as a whole. Following Benedict Anderson and Edward Said's concept of 'imaginary geographies' –a relationship to geography that is more imaginary than real—Schwartz speculates that Man's preference for the Canadian wilderness over Depression era, urban Canada might have been determined by an imaginary construction of the New World derived from 'Wild West' adventure stories popular in Germany when Man was a boy. That these representations were likely modeled on other, equally contrived representations of the wilderness circulating in Europe at the same time—James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* tales, William Notman's portrait of "Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill" and, of course, "Buffalo

Bill's Wild West" traveling show, among them—makes Man's portrayal of Native North Americans captured at Banff's Indian Days, tourist spectacle, a highly mediated and thoroughly fictionalized representation.

Given that the book is organized dialogically, the first section and the book itself conclude with contributions considering oppositional situations. Artist/scholar, Sherry Farrell Racette's "Returning the Fire, Pointing the Canon: Aboriginal Photography as Resistance" ends the first section of the book with an impressive historical survey of photographic practice conducted within Indigenous communities by Indigenous photographers. Indigenous photography is distinguished from "the photo colonialism" of settler and scientific practice by the manner in which the photographers approached their subjects: as individuals framed within a contemporary world of work and domesticity. Artist/curator Jeff Thomas's contribution "Emergence from the Shadow: First Peoples' Photographic Perspectives" concludes the book's last section and its colonial narrative with a discussion of the ways in which the "imaginary Indian" can function as a mode of identification for First Nations subjects. Thomas discusses an exhibition he staged at the Canadian Museum of Civilization pairing historical photographs of Aboriginal subjects with contemporary works by First Nations photographers. His objective was to build a connection between historical and contemporary subjects and forge a sense of historical continuity.

All sections of the book begin with a study of colonial encounters and end with an alternative to or critical reflection on the representation practices at issue in each part; each section addresses a distinct historical moment and mode of production. *Part 2: Circulating Narratives* follows the movement from colonialism to post-colonialism, through the Cold War

years and the burgeoning of Canadian Nationalism and Québec separatism, considering the circulation of ideas about Canada produced in mass mediated photography. *Part 3: Remembering and Forgetting* reflects on the archival age, focusing, in particular, on artistic practices enlisted to redress official memory.

Though all contributions in the book don't address colonialism directly, all speak to related concerns. James Opp's astute study of aircraft manufacturer, Canadair's advertising campaign against "the threat of Communism considers the rhetorical limits of the photography during the Cold War. Two different essays by John O'Brian and Blake Fitzpatrick discuss representational issues of political transparency in historical accounting related to the nuclear era. Sarah Stacy traces the rise and fall of the photo-weekly during the 1970s, considering the proto-multi-cultural discourses of *Weekend* magazine as distinct from the nascent nationalism evinced by *Perspective*, its French language, sister magazine. And though Vincent Lavoie's article on "The Aesthetics and Ethics of Press Pictures in Canadian Contexts" does not consider political history directly, the standards by which press pictures are judged tell us much about the political landscape of contemporary representational practice. Who, what, where, when is an historical event or an historical subject deemed newsworthy? When can and should private life be made public? Indeed, as all the contributions to this book attest, these are issues that bear close scrutiny and studied consideration.

The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada is a major achievement. The depth and quality of the scholarship it presents is impressive and the whole is extremely fascinating. This said, the absence of writing on colonial, post-colonial and Indigenous photographic practices in Quebec

and Eastern Canada is felt and regrettable. Though the editors acknowledge the limited purview of this publication, one can only hope that the cultural work of photography in eastern Canada will be considered next time around.