Framing identity: social practices of photography in Canada (1880-1920)

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TOURIST AND TRAVELER

Cultural and literary theorist, Jonathan Culler draws a subtle distinction between being a traveller and being a tourist, arguing that the traveller is someone who has journeyed to another location for work as opposed to the tourist who travels for recreation. The historian Daniel Boorstin concurs:

The traveller, then, was working at something; the tourist was a pleasure seeker. The traveller was active; he was strenuously in search of people, of adventure and of experience. The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes 'sight-seeing.' He expects everything to be to him and for him. Thus foreign travel ceased to be an activity — experience, an undertaking — and became instead a commodity (1967: 85 cited in Culler 1988: 156).

In this chapter, I wish to extend these concepts of traveller and tourist and relate them to the making and collecting of photographs by women during travel. I argue that photography is a significant tool that assists in this commodification of the experience of travel as well as the construction of identity. Most histories of photography attest to the fact that photography and travel share a long, intertwined history. Events and experiences are literally framed and placed in photograph albums where they can be “consumed” by their viewers. As discussed in previous chapters, photographs are indexed or coded and can easily be read as texts. Thus tourist behaviour such as making travel photographs can be seen as contributing to the semiotics of tourism and travel. Culler writes, “In their most specifically touristic behaviour, tourists are the agents of semiotics: all over the world
they are engaged in reading of cities, landscapes and cultures as sign systems" (1988: 155). Photographs are particularly useful for producing markers that represent the tourist attraction or experience. In his book *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, sociologist Dean MacCannell argues that like the sign, the marker "represents a sight to the tourist" (1976:110 as cited in Culler 1988: 159). MacCannell states that markers such as postcards, souvenirs, pamphlets and information signage all confirm that a sight or experience is noteworthy. Further, tourists often create their own markers by photographing or writing about the sights themselves (160). Photographs attest to the tourist having acquired certain experiences by providing documentary evidence of their travel. The travel photo frequently finds a final resting place in an album that thus becomes part travelogue and, inherently, part autobiographical narrative. The photo album functions as a carefully edited glimpse of "where we went" and "who we are."

Martha Langford, an art historian and founding director of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, makes the argument that as repositories of memory, photo albums are significant because of their performative nature. Langford’s approach to examining these albums combines ideas taken from Walter J. Ong’s *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) with “interactional techniques employed by sociologists, ethnologists, folklorists and photo theorists who bring photographic albums into their work” (Langford 2001: 21). It is this linking of “orality and visuality” that sets Langford’s study apart from those of other writers who have examined the significance of the photo album. She points out that the act of looking through a photo album is often a shared activity through the course of which the album’s creator or owner explains or “reads” the images to the viewer as the pages are turned. In effect, photo albums function as a means of communication that carries a narrative to the viewer, an act of “showing and telling” that links the photo album to the oral tradition of storytelling. Thus it is important for the latter-day viewer to keep in mind that in the absence of a “teller,” an image or image sequence may contain creator-specific, coded signs constructed by the image and album producer or, if not the same individual, both the image’s producer and the editor of the album. While the making of photograph albums may have been a form of social practice, album makers cannot therefore be regarded as social historians seeking to express an “objective truth.” Instead, they are constructors of personal truths that may have social-historical implications.

In this chapter, I analyze how two Canadian army nurses used photographs to situate themselves as travellers and tourists and sign themselves as professional nurses. They used photography both to assert control over an unfamiliar and hence potentially threatening place at a time of crisis and to create identity through collating the resulting images. Nursing sisters Ruby Gordon Peterkin (1887-1961) and Etta Sparks (1879-1917) each produced personal photo albums during the time they were stationed overseas during the First World War. While superficially, and most probably to them at the time, these
albums served primarily as a recreational distraction and a visual diary of their experience, they also document the creation of a new identity for their creators, as professional, working women.

**FINDING THE PHOTOGRAPH ALBUMS**

During a visit to the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa I came across a small pamphlet with a photograph of a young, First World War nursing sister on its cover, (Fig. 5.1). The image and accompanying caption, “explore the human side of war,” reminded me of the writings of Vera Brittain. Brittain was a feminist, activist and Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse who became one of the best-known voices for women from the First World War. *Testament of Youth*, her classic book on women’s experiences from that period, was first published in 1931. The image recalled for me in particular Brittain’s observation that:

> When the Great War broke out, it came to me not as a superlative tragedy, but as an interruption of the most exasperating kind to my personal plans (1978: 17).

As I thought about the young nurse on the pamphlet, I wondered what plans of hers had been interrupted. What was her experience? Did she survive the war and, if so, what was her narrative? I was intrigued to know more yet, given the distance between her time and mine, it seemed unlikely that much, if any, information, would still exist.

The image stayed in my mind as I continued my research on Canadian women photographers at the National Archives of Canada. I began specifically to seek out photographic narratives made or maintained by nursing sisters that might have been preserved in the form of personal albums. A conversation with Peter Robertson, a specialist archivist in military photographs, led me to the photographs and letters of Ruby Gordon Peterkin.3 Here was a nursing sister whose story I could trace. Through her letters and photographs I was able to read information about her and her experiences as a nursing sister in the First World War. Surveying this archival material I was able to form an image of one army nurse, a woman who, like hundreds of others, was uprooted from her grounded consciousness in the ordered familiarity of Canada and sent far from home to care for the human wreckage of war in a foreign land.

In the course of my research on Peterkin, I also discovered a photo album belonging to another Canadian nursing sister, Etta Sparks. Based only on a cursory review of subject and formal pictorial structures, I at first believed this album also to be by Peterkin, however, I subsequently learned that the album was part of a package of materials identified as the Etta Sparks Collection, a donation made to the archives in 1979. While the striking similarities between the two albums make my initial mis-assignment understandable, the fact that, as far as can be determined, Peterkin, who was posted to a hospital in Greece, and

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3 See Robertson (1973) for an excellent discussion of the history of Canadian military photography from 1885 to 1975. This book includes the work of male professional photographers and foregrounds action and frontline imagery and therefore does not include the visions of war of women.
Sparks, who was stationed in Egypt, were unaware of each other, also make it revealing. In both albums the photographs fall into four, broad categories: self-portraits, portraits of other nursing sisters, views of the hospital and tourist snapshots. In both, the positioning of the photographer relative to subject is similar, as is the apparent position of the camera, at approximately eye-level for a person of short to medium height. Neither album contains many photographs that show long views or close-ups. My initial error thus turned out to be productive as it drew my attention to a common, possibly women’s vision that bound the bodies of the work together and led to my decision to undertake a joint analysis of their work.

Peterkin made 304 small black and white photographs while she was stationed at Canadian General Hospital No.4 in Saloniki, Greece from 1915-1917. There is evidence in archival records and in her letters that she not only made the photographs but also made her own prints. The significance of these photographs is apparent in that despite the fact it was difficult to make them at all during wartime, she persisted and made photo albums that narrated her overseas posting. The letters that Peterkin wrote to her sister, Irene, and that are now in the National Archives of Canada, confirm just how difficult it was to get photographic supplies. Film and photographic paper were hard to come by and, given the small amount earned by military nurses, relatively costly. Peterkin must have immensely valued making these images in order to go to the time, trouble and expense to have the supplies necessary to make them shipped all the way from Canada to Greece. A letter sent to her sister confirms this:
Will you send me some 1A junior films 2 1/2 x 4 1/4? Send four rolls at a time, three times with an interval of a week or so apart.... Send me some printing paper so I can print my pictures myself and the stuff to do it with. I don’t think I could tackle the developing myself, but may be able to get them developed. Agnes Campbell has a Kodak you know but films are six francs for a half dozen rolls in Salonique [sic] — nothing doing! Paquet’s daylight paper is the best — mat [sic]. However, you might send some of the kind that you do by lamplight too. Marie will know all that is required and be sure to enclose directions. Perhaps I could develop too. Lots of the girls are doing it. Do you think you could send all the necessities for developing?

Her letters also often speak of exhaustion, so it is noteworthy that she would use what little leisure time that she had to print her own photographs.

Sparks, on the other hand, may not have been a photographer herself, but rather have been a “collector” of images made by others of her acquaintance. The photo album she maintained contains 44 pages of 145 small photos printed on warm tone, chloride paper. All of the images appear to have been made in 1915 while she was stationed in Egypt at Canadian General Hospital No. 5. Many of the photographs are accompanied by handwritten, often humorous captions. The last seven pages of the album are blank. Sadly,
Sparks did not have the opportunity to return home to Canada, as she died from breast cancer in England in 1917. She was 38 years old. The background information on Sparks that I have found is limited. Instead I have had to rely almost entirely upon the photographs left behind in her album to learn more of her narrative.

Although rare, the wartime albums of Sparks and Peterkin are not unique. Langford’s study includes discussion of photograph albums made by two other Canadian nurses from this period, only one of whom went overseas. What is common to both, and this is true too of those of Peterkin and Sparks, is the seeming ordinariness of the authors’ wartime experience. In none is the war highlighted in any way. The photographs are inserted into the album’s chronological flow with no more notice than had they been the records of another birthday or Christmas or outing to the beach. As Langford observes, “The actuality of experience is distorted in the process [of creating the photo album] and its true lessons are suppressed” (73). A further album, compiled by a woman ambulance driver from the Second World War, further substantiates the elements of optimistic fiction present in these women’s wartime albums. Little reference is made to the actual difficulties that were present. Langford reads the images as cheerful snapshots of family and friends in the service and photographs of recuperating patients as an attempt to normalize the chaos of war, to reduce concern and make the situation appear more manageable: Deliberately so it seems, the European theatre has been shrunk and placed in a familiar photographic container. The album’s snapshots of a mobilized nursing sorority could easily be transported to the family album; even the military photographs are designed to defuse anxiety and bring the global tempest to a domestic teapot scale (76).

Both the Sparks and Peterkin albums, which, although unlike those discussed by Langford are dedicated to the particular period of wartime service, also carefully avoid including any direct wartime reference. In positioning themselves within a story of their own creation, these women compiled albums that functioned as a constructed representational discourse that selectively chronicled their memoirs.

Despite the fact that photograph albums often compose a personal narrative, they are now also considered social-historical documents and are collected by the National Archives of Canada and other museums and archives. Yet these photographs are more than ordinary historical documents. It must be remembered that they are highly unusual in that few, amateur, women photographers or photo album creators of the time dealt with any images beyond their own, usually domestic experience. Even places pictured in tourist or travel images most commonly only served as a backdrop to family activities. The albums of these two Canadians are significant in that they were constructed by women not contained by the domestic sphere but, rather, by professional women working far from the familiar securities of home, in foreign lands, amidst the unpredictable chaos of a world war.
SITUATING THE SELF

In Chapters Two and Four, I have considered how photography acts as a tool of the colonizer. I now want to consider how tourists and travellers use the camera to address their unease in the face of the foreign and how the resulting photographs, particularly when collected together and ordered in albums, constitute a visual discourse revelatory of the collator’s identity. I consider several of the numerous theorists and writers that have turned their attention to how the photographic act facilitates this reorientation from foreign to familiar and, through my analysis of the work of Peterkin and Sparks that follows, I offer examples of how their use of photographs produced in this way enabled them to develop and establish identity.

One of the great challenges for the traveller and, to a lesser extent, the tourist, is situating themselves in a new place. Dutch theorist and historian Ginette Verstraete, in reflecting on the relationship between tourism and place in her essay “Heading for Europe: Tourism and the Global Itinerary of an Idea” (2002), describes tourism as “a kind of ritual of individual self-positioning” that is marked by generalized differences that cause the final common destination to function as a “contested space” (2002: 36). Anxieties arising from confrontations with such contested spaces can be made more tolerable through the exercise of familiar social practices such as making photographs. Thus the traveller or tourist will usually photograph those sites, people or events that most obviously differ from those of their common experience and, when at all possible, will include themselves as well.

Photography allows for what British historian Derrick Price has termed a “mode of surveying the unknown” (1997: 67). Both the tourist and the traveller make photographs to capture memories and make records of places travelled. Susan Sontag, whose argument I first brought forward in this study in relation to Mattie Gunterman’s tourist photographs in Chapter One, contends that individuals use photography “to take possession of a space in which they are insecure” (1978: 9). Sontag asserts that the tourist finds comfort by putting the camera between her and the “foreign” location or experience. She writes, “The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel” (9). The making of photographs, though, is only the final step in the “activity of taking pictures” and is preceded by an indexical process that moves from awareness through pointing out, to selection or framing. Richard Holden, a Canadian photographer, has observed that for people travelling in foreign lands, the “frame” of the camera viewfinder acts as a kind of portable window. He argues that in the West, “home” represents security and is often associated with a residential structure having (usually) rectangular windows through which the home dweller can safely look upon and objectify the world.

What then could be more natural than that, as we grow up and start travelling to strange, exotic and unpredictable places, we carry our portable windows with us?
Wrap a frame around something and you control it. Take a picture of something and you neutralize it (Holden 1984: 6).

Such ideas of power and control are prevalent in the writing of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. Foucault examines closely the concept of power that exists in parts of social structure. His view that ordinary lives are objectified through documentary photography also informs the writings of the British art theoretician John Tagg. In his collection of essays *The Burden of Representation* (1988), Tagg too proposes that documentary and surveillance modes of photographic expression also function as assertions of power and control. This precisely describes the way photography is employed by the tourist or traveller. The camera first provides a license to survey and a shield from behind which to distance and objectify the threat of the unfamiliar. Second, framing facilitates fragmentation, and thus control, of the foreign or exotic experience. And finally, the camera’s capacity to document or, to use the common photographic terminology, to “take” or “capture” images, enables assertion of power through acquisition.\(^9\)

Both Peterkin and Sparks used photography in this way. They were both stationed in overseas hospitals and, while no doubt their picture-taking served partially as an escape from the day-to-day challenges of their nursing practice, it is equally clear that the visual diary each created from their photographs helped them ground themselves. By making images to send home and place in their personal albums, they created a visual record of their new identity as professionals within a particular context. Their albums also contain images of new people and places encountered during leaves from their stations when they used their cameras in much the same way as modern tourists. Making portraits and self-portraits surrounded by the unfamiliar links the identity of the maker with the foreign space by effectively providing evidentiary documentation that necessarily establishes a symbiotic relationship between person and place.

Teresa De Lauretis, a leading feminist scholar in psychoanalytic theory, cultural studies and film theory, argues that gender identity is constructed and transformed through a sign system that is part of social identity (1984: 166). De Lauretis writes, “We have learned that one becomes a woman in the very practice of signs by which we live, write, speak, see” (186). In this respect, the photographs made by Peterkin and Sparks may appear less engaging than the images of the more experienced photographers, Geraldine Moodie and Mattie Gunterman. Nonetheless, despite their lack of visual sophistication, the nurses’ images are equally richly coded with semiotic meaning. The signing of personal identity is as much present in the nurses’ photograph albums as it is in the work of the other two women. To varying degrees, all four women produced their images as a consequence of displacement, either physical or cultural or both. Moodie photographed Inuit in the Arctic; Gunterman, her experience pioneering in the wilderness of central British Columbia; and Peterkin and Sparks, while doing their duty in the midst of a World War, far from

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\(^9\) See also Green (1997: 119-131) for an outline of the key issues raised in the work of Foucault related to photography and social power.
home, surrounded by landscapes and cultures entirely alien to their experience. In fact, it may be that their identity as "nurses" was easier to define because of the circumstances thrust upon them by war. Their photograph albums depict these women as adventurous, caring, good-humoured and hard-working professional women, the ideal manifestation of the nursing sister. The photographs to be read in this chapter are evidence of this.

Angels of Mercy

All the Sisters of Mercy  
they are not departed or gone  
They are waiting for me  
When I thought that I just can't go on  
And they bring me their comfort  
and later they brought me this song  
Oh I hope that you run into them  
You who've been travelling so long.  
(Cohen 1993: 109)

The Canadian poet and songwriter Leonard Cohen's song "Sisters of Mercy" has become a contemporary anthem of compassion. This song connects the notions of comfort and support to the phrases "sister of mercy" and "angel of mercy." The term "sister of mercy" traditionally referred to nuns who provided care of for the injured and ill. "Angel of mercy" was similarly used to describe Canadian nursing sisters in the First and Second World Wars. Among trained nurses the term "sister," as a professional designation, was earned only after a number of successful years in the profession (104).

As with Geraldine Moodie's recognition as a "photographer," the recognition of "nursing" as a profession set nurses apart from other women. A career working in a professionally designated occupation offered women an escape from the roles to which they had traditionally been assigned as housewives, domestics or menial workers. In Vera Brittain: A Feminist Life (1996) historian Deborah Gorham comments on the heroic and feminine myth that became the popular vision of wartime nurses "with a tradition extending back to Florence Nightingale's mission to the Crimea" (100). This was especially true in Canada, where nursing offered women an even higher social status than it did in Britain (Gwyn 1992: 439). In Canada, nurses serving in the military also received recognition in other ways. Those serving in the First World War were given the right to vote federally through the Military Voters Act in 1917 (Prentice 1988: 207). All Canadian nurses were given a commissioned rank; they entered the Army Medical Corps at the level of "Lieutenant" Canadian nursing sisters had the same social status as commissioned officers (1996: 101).
Interior of my corner of tent, Saloniki, Greece, April 1916 (Fig. 5.2) is a self portrait of Peterkin, made while stationed at No. 4 General Hospital CAMC that visually articulates the ideal of the nursing sister. Peterkin composed the photograph to conform to the “angel of mercy” archetype and gives it visible contours. The photograph records the nursing sister writing at a small table inside her tent and documents her living quarters. The tent and all its furnishing indicate this is a temporary residence. For example, she is writing at a folding table, and there is a striped deck chair to her right. Both are easily packed away. There are also small “civilizing” touches all around the tent interior. The footlocker behind her has a tablecloth over it, as does her writing desk. Several thick cushions cover her trunk in the foreground. Peterkin writes of these efforts to her sister Irene:

[The tents] have no floors of course, but we have procured matting from the Greeks and it keeps the floor dry. We have four rag rugs one in front of each bed, so we are quite comfortable. We were supplied with two stoves to a tent and we each purchased a lamp from town. We are not allowed to leave the camp but can send orders with Capt. Trump who does some of the wonderful purchasing. We got Alice blue sateen to cover our packing boxes and really our tent looks quite pretty and comfortable, and our stoves are painted Alice blue."

Such homey comforts are attempts at personalizing space. They help to center the individual despite the hardship of living in a temporary dwelling. Geographer Tim Creswell makes similar arguments about the significance of how places are transformed into temporary "homes" by displaced peoples. Creswell writes:

Place is constituted through reiterative social practice — place is made and remade on a daily basis. Place provides a template for practice — an unstable stage for performance. Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an a-priori label of identity (2002: 25).

Peterkin's photograph shows a place of her own making, a provisional "home" that serves as retreat from the public sphere and her wartime duties. She has created a personal theatre within which she can perform her identity as a military nurse.

British author Val Williams has written extensively about women photographers and war. She outlines the evolution of women as documentarists and argues that until the end of the First World War, they tended to record personal images of their own circumstances, rather than making more generalized statements about the nature of war. She cites the example of a studio portraitist Olive Edis who accompanied British women ambulance drivers and nurses from the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADS) to France. Edis also concentrated on making a record of everyday life. Like Peterkin, she documented the interiors of huts where the nurses lived. Williams describes a similar attention to the personalizing of this temporary "home":

By insisting, through her photograph, that the interior of the hut was a personalized, homely setting rather than a temporary foreign refuge, Edis saw the women as attempting to assert certain values — of home, of womanliness and of independence (1991 [1986]: 32).

This transformation of a temporary space into a "home" was also apparent in their photo albums.

Costume or uniform can be an essential component in the construction of personal identity. This was certainly true for nursing sisters like Peterkin and Sparks. Just as for the stage performer, costume assisted them in assimilating their assigned role. Perhaps more importantly, though, through their photographs their nurses' uniforms became a vehicle, a concrete expression of their identity that through their images and albums communicated coded clues as to both what and who they were. In the portrait made inside her tent, Peterkin is wearing the starched, high-collared uniform of the Canadian nursing sister. Her cap is extended down the back of her neck like a veil, giving her a nun-like quality. Her gaze is downward and it appears she is reading. She is behind a small, cloth-covered table and is flanked by two, tall candlesticks with candles. Peterkin, the nursing sister, looks like a nun at an altar. Candles, candlelight and table cloth all contribute to creating a formally structured centre to an image of a temporary domestic environment otherwise character-
ized by its informality. Behind Peterkin's right shoulder there is a small banner or scarf with a cross on it. To her left it appears that a candle is burning; however, the photograph shows only a mirrored reflection that appears to illuminate the tent. As she works before the camera's "objective" gaze, Peterkin's placement, stance and downcast eyes communicate a message of piety and modesty. Here, she presents herself as a professional, Christian nurse. Peterkin uses the camera to frame a serious portrait that not only indicates the responsible role that she has assumed as a wartime caregiver, but also reveals the operative moral code that informs it.

Sparks, too, implies a spiritual subtext to the nurse identity with her playful captioning of the image: Heavenly Twins (Figure 5.3). This snapshot catches two nursing sisters in their working uniforms posed outdoors beneath a leaf-covered arbor. Sparks is the figure on the right, a fact highlighted by an X drawn on the album page margin above her head. Like Peterkin, Sparks used photography to help sign herself in the nursing sister role. The "Twins" personify the image of goodliness that came to be associated with the nurses. Caregiving was respected in women of this period and was viewed as appropriate to what was believed to be an inherently nurturing and sensitive nature. Noteworthy as well is how, like all uniforms, the uniform worn by the two nurses masks their individual identity. Sparks use of the word "Twins" in her caption can be taken as her acknowledgement of this and, barring the unlikely possibility of irony, her willing compliance as well.

For Sparks and her colleagues, the nurse's uniform was a positive contributor to constructing an enhanced image of themselves and, coincidentally, for women as a whole. The uniform itself was at this time relatively rare in its use as a designator of women's occupations, their most common application being for those employed as maids; however, the status associated with these was of a far lesser order. According to Gorham, the nursing uniform was a transforming sign of new status for women as professionals (1996: 101).

The upkeep of such a uniform, particularly during wartime, became an act of discipline and professionalism. The two women wear long, white aprons made from starched cotton or linen over their uniform dresses to protect them. Although the aprons have been laundered, they appear to still carry traces of bloodstains along their hems, drawing attention to the fact that these are working clothes worn while tending the sick and injured in
a battle zone. The white head covers were made from a meter square of cotton or linen and were worn in recognition of Florence Nightingale and her work in the Crimean War (collectionsic.gc.ca 2004).

Williams also examines issues related to uniformed women by analyzing the photographs of Christina Broom (1863-1939), one of the earliest, professional women photographers in Britain. Broom documented groups of uniformed women, such as the First Women's Police force in Britain who posed for her camera in 1916 (1991[1986]: 30). Williams points out that both Broom's images of uniformed women and her pictures of serviceman stress orderliness, while in Edis's wartime images discussed earlier, uniforms are presented simply as work attire (31). Likewise, the photographs of Peterkin and Sparks show them wearing their uniforms as functional work-wear rather than as ceremonial costume.

Another image from Sparks's album is captioned "Twelve Noble Ladies" (Fig. 5.4), a title that references the popular understanding of nurses as noble, respected and valued contributors to society. There is also an element of whimsy in the way the women
align themselves for the camera, their pose a seeming reference to that of a line of chorus girls. Each woman, except for the first in line, who is also the only one to appear mildly discomforted by the experience, has her hand on the shoulder of the next woman. Several are cuddling their faces into the back of the “sister” in front of her. One even makes a coquettish gesture by peeking out from behind the head-covering of another. The last nurse is oddly bisected by the edge of the photograph, although whether this cropping results from intention, carelessness or accident is impossible to say. The obviously willing participation of most of the subjects in this contrived pose, their generally relaxed and playful response to the camera and the unifying effect of their uniforms all contribute to a message of “team spirit” and group identity. Strangely unbalanced, the composition is deliberately arranged to allow space in front of the group to show a rather institutional-looking building in the background.

The conveyed spirit of camaraderie and contrived pose of this photograph appears to have been modelled upon a kind of contemporaneous group portrait often made at select girls’ schools. A comment by one young nurse of the time supports this view. “Life within a military hospital,” she wrote, “is a school within a school.”¹ Everything in the image has been deliberately staged to contribute to an impression of group belonging but, as the pose, facial expressions and caption suggest, this collective identity also requires a measure of infantilisation upon which to build.

Camaraderie is also evident in one of Peterkin’s photographs, identified by the National Archives of Canada as Women bathers, probably nurses with No. 4 General hospital, Saloniki, Greece (Fig 5.5), although in a very different setting and in a very different way. This photograph of a group of six women reveals a brief moment of private respite from the nurses’ demanding, professional role and is one of the few in Peterkin’s album to show the women out of uniform. Time away from duty was necessary for the women to escape the trauma and stress of their nursing responsibilities. As one of the nursing sisters wrote in a letter home: “There is plenty of sorrow and sadness over here — but one can’t worry all the time or one would go insane...”¹ Of all the images in Peterkin’s album, this is one of the least formal and certainly one of the most intimate in its revelation of the personal relationships between women as women, rather than as professional colleagues. While part of the intimacy derives from the obvious comfort the women feel in each other’s company, most credit must be given to the fact that the maker of the photograph was also a woman.

In the image, the women pose against a vertical rock surface with their arms draped around each other. They all stand knee deep, except for one woman in the right centre foreground who is partially submerged, the water covering her body below the chest. All appear relaxed and comfortable, presenting themselves to the camera as “girls together” in a manner that had the photographer not been one of their own would have been most unlikely at this time among young women of this social class.

The quality of personal closeness between the women differs markedly from that
apparent in Sparks's "Noble Ladies." In that photograph, Sparks's subjects stand upon a rise of land, fully in the open, beneath a noonday sun. Most striking is that they present themselves not as particular women but as a professional category, namely "nurses." The astonishing consistency of their collective pose further confirms the intentionality of this as it effectively collapses the identities of 12 individuals into that of a single, multi-headed creature. The unidentified and rather grand building in the background is clearly intended to provide context both to the situation and to those involved.

By way of contrast, in Peterkin's photograph the six women bathers huddle against an anonymous rock face that simultaneously decontextualizes them and shields them from any unwanted gaze. The location could be anywhere, but, unlike Spark's photograph, each of the six women is specific and individual. There is no hint that the women's apparent affinity for each other derives from anything beyond similar age, common experience and friendship. Their association is clearly personal, not professional.

Yet in gain there is also loss. In substituting bathing costume for uniform they also give up the deference and respect bestowed by society upon the professional, collective identity of nurse and with it, the corresponding security. For evidence of this, consider Peterkin's choice of location. Positioning her subjects in front of the rock has necessarily dictated the position of the camera relative to the sun. This in turn, has seriously constrained her ability to produce a technically sound photograph.

The No. 1A Kodak Junior camera that Peterkin used had a limited number of exposure controls and, in keeping with the usual practice evident in her other work, given the choice Peterkin would doubtless have made every effort to follow the then conventional dictates of good picture-making. These were to photograph only in the hours between mid-morning and mid-afternoon and to keep the sun over her left shoulder. With simple cameras such as Peterkin's, to deviate significantly from this formula was to risk serious under or overexposure of the negative. Given the strong side-lighting evident in this photograph, it is not surprising that the source negative is underexposed. Why, then, did Peterkin choose this site and this time of day? The time is easily explained in that it would have had to be when the women were off duty, and in that they would have been given little choice. The choice of site is more significant, though, as positioning her subjects in front of the rock face has forced Peterkin to photograph against or at least across the light. Obviously, the choice of this location was dictated by other than photographic considerations. Ease of access to the water must be discounted, given the apparent two-metre drop to the surface and the verticality of the cliff makes it entirely unsuitable for sunbathing. Perhaps the best clue appears along the top edge of the image, above the rock where there is no indication of foliage, brush or trees, in fact nothing that might hamper a clear view of the water and anything or anyone in it. It is therefore hard not to conclude that what the site offered was a measure of concealment and hence protection, and that these qualities outweighed any constraints that choice necessarily imposed upon making photographs.
In effect, the rock face is a short-term, situational replacement for the more encompassing security conferred by the nurses’ uniform and, coincidentally, by so being, further contributes to understanding the significance of the uniform in the construction of these women’s identities.

The photographs considered above show both how the camera provided a means for these women to create a personal, visual narrative and, in addition, reveal different aspects of a collective identity that bound this group of young nurses together. When viewing Peterkin’s and Sparks’s albums, it is striking, given the dramatic context in which they were produced, just how narrowly focused the content is. Typically the images are of themselves and other nurses, their immediate surroundings and their everyday activities. Nowhere is there any suggestion that either woman attempted to document the larger, all-encompassing reality of the war itself. Strange as it may seem, this is a feature common to nurses’ albums of the time. As Williams has said:

Just as a postcard from the seaside or a picture in the family album stands of evidence of a happening at a particular time, and in a tangible way proves the identity or status of
the sender or the photographer, so these photographs show not so much a wish to communicate with some wider audience the conditions of war or the culture of foreign lands, but rather are a substantiation of the fact that they were there. Functioning almost like snapshot photography, but with an important difference, this wartime record making was destined for an album rather than a newspaper or an archive, for personal consumption rather than public use (1991: 31).

Women made these photographs as a means of re-situating their far-from-home selves. As such, the important thing was to construct a visual narrative in which they were the central characters and on the evidence, the fact that they were also surrounded by “the war to end all wars” was of concern only to the extent that it impacted upon that narrative.

HOSPITAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Both Peterkin and Sparks include photographs made of their hospital wards in their albums. These interiors are examples of the subtleties that may be indicated through the concept of mise-en-scène. Bal describes the concept of mise-en-scène as a construction of a theatrical setting “whose results shelter and foster performance” (2002:97). What is performed in hospital wards is medical care and attention by doctors and nurses, yet surprisingly, in none of these images made by working nurses is anything that looks like healing or caring activity recorded. Rather, the photographs show hospital wards as static stage sets, the purpose of which a viewer can divine only through implication or by reading an associated caption. In fact, the content of these images all seems to be so carefully placed, it might be said that the only true documentation is of the photographer’s directing hand. These are records of a proscenium stage, an idealized hospital set in which the patients are no more than actors, their beds and other medical accoutrements no more than props. Apart from the album caption, the only indication that they were made in a hospital is the presence in some of them of a nurse. The soldiers depicted show no signs of illness or injury and bear little resemblance to patients. These subjects have clearly been sanitized for the camera. Pain and suffering are absent. Instead, the emphasis is upon presenting an idealized view of the work environment of the professional nurse.

Images such as the one by Peterkin entitled by the Archives Soldiers sitting on bunks in a hut, No. 4 Canadian General Hospital, Salonika, Greece, 1916-17 (Fig. 5.6) are typical of these hospital ward photographs in which the location, camera angle and subjects are all carefully staged to document a positive image of the nurses’ work environment. In this case, the camera was held or positioned at waist level, most likely to facilitate use of the rotating, perisopic viewfinder that on Peterkin’s camera was mounted directly above the lens. This placed it at the same height as the heads of the patients who sit in orderly rows on their beds along each wall of a long, rectangular room. The camera has been tilted

slightly toward the ceiling. The position emphasizes a dynamic representation of perspective through convergence of the lines of floor and ceiling boards, patches of sunlight that recede along the floor and an apparent diminution of what can be assumed to be objects of similar size. The hospital cots, mosquito nets and men who sit along each side of the frame all appear to become smaller as the eye is drawn back to a distant door that significantly, being closed, interrupts the eye’s natural urge to find a vanishing point. The composition thus deftly turns the gaze back upon itself, highlighting through repetition neatness, order, calm and, of course, the men. Most important though, the end of all the eye’s travels is the one woman upon whom the gaze unavoidably, and thus inevitably, comes to rest: the nurse who appears to guard the shut door at the back of the room.

The image is crowded with figures. The two, long rows of men framing the walk back to the door give an indication as to the numbers that passed through the hospital. What is not clear is whether these men are actually patients. Not one is bed-ridden; none appear significantly injured or disfigured. For what are supposed to be soldiers recovering from the effects of battle, they all appear astonishingly, if not unbelievably, whole and healthy.
Either the enemy's weapons have had little effect or the nursing care has had a great deal. Each man seated on the end of a perfectly made-up cot, is wearing a clean, light-coloured shirt and, of all things, a tie. Every one gazes directly into the camera. The scene has more the atmosphere of a boarding school dormitory than a hospital ward. Even the nurse, standing beside the door at the end of the aisle between the beds and the only possible reference to the room's real purpose, could just as easily be a school matron.

This photograph works on two levels. First, it is a document of what were enhanced hospital facilities. This particular hospital had moved from tents to huts in May 1916, an improvement that provided patients better and more hygienic accommodation as unlike tents, the huts had wooden floors that could be cleaned (Nicholson 1975: 6) and, as is visible in the image, electric lighting. Like all of the images of hospitals in these nurses' albums though, this photograph also operates on a second, more complex level, as a mise-en-scène where nurses can act out their professional role and in which the visual elements, both
human and material, are called upon to serve a larger, metaphoric purpose. In this case, for example, over the soldiers’ heads the mosquito nets tied back above the beds take on a halo-like quality, ephemeral symbols of blessedness or saintliness that hint of both death and salvation. The patches of light that move back along the floor lead directly to the closed door. This pathway between the beds, past the rows of soldiers, symbolizes another journey out of the ward, one that must lead to either damnation or salvation. The door is the only way off the stage, and guarding it, at the focal point of the image, is an anonymous nurse, an Angel of Mercy, either Gabriel or Lucifer depending upon the ultimate fate of each she helps across its threshold.

Thus, while ostensibly a documentary record of a specific wartime hospital, this photograph is at least equally, if not more, effective in its symbolic inscription of the larger concept of “war” itself. Integral to this, and fundamental to the maker’s need to create identity, are clues as to the challenging and necessarily fraught role of those called upon to minister to the broken, human detritus that inevitably results.

A second photograph, captioned Nursing sister and patients in a hut, No. 4 Canadian General Hospital, CAMC at Kalamaria near Salonika, Greece (Fig. 5.7), shows another view of the same hospital ward. This image features Peterkin herself, who sits to the right foreground of the picture. She is smiling and looks directly into the camera. The composition in this image is relatively symmetrical, the photograph having been made more toward the middle of the room. Direct access to the door at the back is obstructed by one of the men, who sits in a chair in the aisle between the cots. He and two other men are wearing what appears to be a form of loose-fitting headgear, although to what purpose it is impossible to say. The viewpoint is somewhat lower than in the first image and the camera more level. This results in an image that takes in more floor and less ceiling which, being also less well lit in this photograph, makes it appear lower and the room less spacious. The overall effect is to give the scene a greater sense of closeness and intimacy, even though the figures are further removed from the camera. For a number of reasons, it seems likely that Peterkin set this image up herself and used the “T” setting on her camera’s shutter to have the film exposed by a third party uncovering and then re-covering the lens. I have already mentioned the lower-than-usual camera position that suggests it was placed on some kind of stand, rather than being held by the photographer. This view is further supported by the fact that overall, the photograph is much sharper than the previous image, showing no evidence of the camera shake so typical of hand-held photographs of interiors at this time. Perhaps where this image differs most, though, is in its specificity. Whereas the first photograph alludes to the profession of nursing as a whole, with Peterkin being connected to that profession only by association through its inclusion in her album, this photograph makes Peterkin the featured player, the particular woman who is the nurse. This causes the power of the symbology to diminish too, even though the physical elements of its representation remain the same. By asserting her place as the starring player,
Peterkin effectively shifts the predominant tone of this image from metaphor toward document, although the men, her patients, still seem more representative than specific.

These photographs also make a clear distinction between the role of the women, the nurses who are the caregivers and the men who are the soldiers and objects of care, making these images also a statement about power. Both photographs reveal a bounded territory, and the viewer is left in no doubt as to whose it is. In different ways, but no less equally, in both images the women are very much in charge. In the hospital setting the nurses, all of whom were officers and almost, if not all of whom were women, had authority over their male patients. In some cases this might have been dictated by differentials of rank, but within these walls, for all, dependency inverted what beyond them was still very much a patriarchal social dynamic.

A third interior, this time from Sparks's album and captioned simply Hospital 1915 (Fig. 5.8), is of a different order. Here, the distance between the subjects and the photographer is greater. It is a picture of some thing rather than some body. The space is less easily accessed as the spectator's gaze is blocked by a row of columns that divide the frame vertically into two, unequal areas, one of which takes up three quarters of the space while the remainder occupies the other. All the men appear to be wearing pyjamas. To the left of the frame, some men sit erect, while others at the back stand. All are self-consciously still and gaze directly at the camera with serious expressions. On the right side of the frame, there are only two men, one of whom is lying down. The only points of egress are the large, open windows set into the side walls, although none of the men seems remotely interested in leaving. The image is bleak, empty and pathetic, a quality ironically given greater emphasis by the untidy garlands dangling from the ceiling and columns — decorations that accompanying documentation from the National Archives of Canada describes as having been put up to celebrate Christmas. Like the previous images, this one too expresses the fictional theatricality of mise-en-scène, yet if Peterkin's photographs make allusions to heaven and hell, the reference here is clearly to limbo. The scene is almost Kafkaesque in its sense of waiting for the whim of an unknown power. The overriding feeling is one of stasis and aimlessness.

In all of these photographs hospital interiors are presented as controlled stages upon which the drama of the nurses' daily life is played out. Even if not an entirely accurate portrayal, to varying degrees they all show a well-ordered world that within the narrative context of the nurses' albums is made to seem the exclusive domain of the nursing sister. In point of fact, final authority on the running of the ward or any particular patient's care would have fallen to the resident, Medical Corps doctor who, at that time, would certainly have been a man. It must be taken as significant then that in none of these images made or collected by nurses for their albums, does anyone recogniz able as a physician appear. Instead, the nurse, the woman, is always the protagonist, either overtly due to her presence in the photographs or implicitly as the owner and narrator of the album.
STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

In the early 1960s Robert Heinlein wrote his classic, speculative fiction novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*. In it a character born on a mission to Mars returns to earth as the only survivor of the journey. Naturally he has no knowledge of his home planet's social structures, culture or religions. This plot parallels the situation of the two nurses, Sparks and Peterkin, who share a mitigated version of this experience, being transported from the safety of their domestic hearths in Canada to the Greece and Egypt in the turbulence of the Great War. This relocation in place and culture made them also “strangers in a strange land.” At that time it was uncommon for young Canadian women to travel to what for them would have been such exotic locations. The contrast with their homeland must have been significant, to say the least.

In July 2004, I visited the National Portrait Gallery in London where *Off the Beaten Track, Three Centuries of Women Travellers* was one of the summer exhibition highlights. In the exhibition catalogue, British historian Dea Birkett argues that women travelled for many
reasons including adventure, escape, politics, love, loneliness and curiosity. The earliest women travellers who did so for a vocation were artists and writers (2004: 95). Travel was sometimes a necessary step that allowed women to establish independence and develop their own personal identity. Culler argues, “to make your fortune you have to leave home and, often, to travel a long way” (2000: 48). In Travelling Concepts In the Humanities (2002), Mieke Bal draws on this metaphor of travel and writes that the rigors of travel must be endured “if you are to achieve the gain of new experience” (2002: 4).

Women who travelled often found themselves viewed as strangers or aliens. Travel by women, particularly unaccompanied travel, was seen to put their gender identities at stake (Hoving 1999: 213; Wolf 1993: 233). It was often regarded as threatening to their alleged femininity. In her first book on women and travel, Spinsters Abroad (1989), Birkett revealed that “Victorian lady travellers” were often addressed as “Sir” by native peoples in places that they visited (as cited in Wolf 1993: 233). Thus Victorian women travellers who asserted authority were seen at this time as more masculine because travel was considered a gendered pursuit. Histories of travel concur that travel was not easily assessable for women: in many societies being feminine has been defined as sticking close to home. Masculinity, by contrast has been the passport for travel. Feminist geographers and ethnographers have been amassing evidence revealing that a principal difference between women and men in countless societies has been the license to travel away from a place thought of as home (Enloe 1989 as cited in Wolf 1993: 229).

Despite restrictions imposed by societal expectation, sociologist Janet Wolf argues that women did travel. She cites numerous women travellers and later historians who chronicle their adventures (1993: 232). 16

Photography quickly became a popular activity for women travellers, as it could be used to help to explain why they travelled. Birkett confirms that photography was a socially acceptable activity for women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This was because the camera was unencumbered by the baggage of high art and therefore was able to sidestep the “inbuilt social prejudice against women taking it up” (2004: 116). 17

Sontag describes photography as first coming into its own as an extension of the eye of the flâneur, a term used by the poet Baudelaire to describe the middle-class man who has the currency to wander at his leisure in the public sphere and watch society with no responsibility toward what he watches. The German writer and critic Walter Benjamin enlarged upon the concept in the unfinished, major project of his final years, the Passagen-Werk (Arcades Project), which he undertook between 1927-39. 18 Critical theorist Susan Buck-Morss has considered the implications of Benjamin’s flâneur as visual practice. She argues that “[t]he gambler and the flâneur in the Arcades project personify the empty time of modernity” (1991[1989]: 228). A connection can be made to this empty time of the flâneur and the free time of the tourist who can also wander about with little to do except observe.

16 This list of women who travel has been updated in Dea Birkett’s most recent book, Off the Beaten Track, Three Centuries of Women Travellers, 2004. It includes an overview of significant women travellers from 1600–1960. It includes such women voyagers as Lady Hester Stanhope, Lady Gordon Duff, Isabelle Bird, Dame Rebecca West, Dame Freya Stark, Constance Gordon Cumming, Gertrude Bell, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Jane Digby, Emily Eden, Amelia Edwards, Mary Kingsley, Vita Sackville-West and the noted portrait photographer Julia Margaret Cameron.

17 Photography is still used as an “acceptable” reason for a woman travelling alone. For example, I received an email this morning from an art historian friend travelling alone in Myanmar. She described being asked numerous times why she was travelling alone and found that that using the camera helped significantly to justify her travel activities. When I asked her for other reasons why she thought women photographed when they travel, she responded: “To capture a moment in our lives before it is gone.” The camera then helps women travellers to collect experience before it disappears. E-mail from Dr. Mary Ann Stegges, Yangon, Myanmar, May 3, 2005.

18 See Buck-Morss (1991[1989]) for a detailed analysis of Benjamin’s Arcade project.
Buck-Morss explains Benjamin's view that the ultimate flâneur is the street sandwich-man, the human billboard who strolls along wearing a sandwich-board advertisement, yet is still able to gaze at the life of the city. Benjamin refers to him as "the true salaried flâneur" (1991[1989]: 396). At last the flâneur has found an appropriate "job." Similarly, I argue the tourist too has "work," their job being to gather images to document their travels.

Feminist art historian Griselda Pollock describes the flâneur as a symbol of "the privilege or freedom to move about in public areas of the city observing but never interacting, consuming sights through a controlling but rarely acknowledged gaze" (1988: 67). Wolf has commented there is no female equivalent to the masculine flâneur; she contends that there cannot be a kind of "female flâneuse" (cited in Pollock 1988: 71). I argue, however, that the camera has made it possible for women to have at least a temporary idea of what this freedom would be like. Under the guise of taking photographs, women are able to explore more openly in the public sphere than otherwise. In fact, in this respect, in some cultural contexts, women may have even more freedom than men, a man photographing often being viewed with suspicion while a similarly engaged women is more likely to excite curiosity.

However, during the period before the First World War, photography was generally available to only a relatively small number of women in North America. Like travel, it required that women have certain means. In her comprehensive overview of women and their relationship with photography, A History of Women Photographers, Naomi Rosenblum asserts that most tourist and travel photography before the First World War was seen as a luxury and in Europe and North America was practiced primarily by the middle classes. Rosenblum writes:

It is therefore rare to find travel photographs made by women before the 1920s unless they were wealthy or, as in the case of the two nurses foregrounded in this chapter, were working abroad.

Sontag further writes that the "photographer is the armed version of the solitary walker" who seeks the "picturesque" (1978: 55). The concept of the picturesque is widely used in relationship to photography, particularly in describing landscape imagery. British art historian Graham Clarke defines it as a qualifier of a series of ideals that make a scene appropriate to include in a photograph or painting. Clarke argues that the picturesque was not reality based but instead, structured an ideal vision of nature. He asserts, "[a]s a cultural index, the picturesque ... sought visual confirmation of a timeless Arcadia; a unified image of social life" (1997: 55). A succinct exposition of the concept of the picturesque can be found in Dutch film theorist Nanna Verhoeff's study of early examples

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19 A discussion of the picturesque in relationship to the landscape and the tourist aesthetic is explored in Malcolm Andrew's The Search for the Picturesque (1989) and in the prior study by Christopher Hussey, The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View (1927).

1999
of the American film genre, the Western. Verhoef considers the difference between the Romantic notion of the sublime and the picturesque. She argues that contrary to the sublime, the viewer is not overwhelmed and consumed by the experience of the picturesque and thus is able to keep the “object of the vision at a safe distance” (2002:202). Like Sontag, Verhoef argues that reshaping experience into the picturesque helps to make it more controllable. She states that seeking the picturesque provides the spectator with a protective, “invisible screen” that is backed off from reality and direct experience.

For those enculturated in Western traditions, the picturesque is a known, that is, an easily recognized, almost formulaic understanding of what constitutes a “good” picture and as has been discussed elsewhere in this study, a picture is only a picture because it has a frame. Thus the picturesque holds great appeal for photographers, constituting, as it does, ready-made guidelines for culturally sanctioned deconstructions of any experienced visible world. For camera-carrying tourists in particular, seeking out the “picturesque” to photograph is always a comfort, reassuring them time after time that no matter its immediate strangenesses, the world, any world, is conformable to their expectations and not the reverse.

This was equally true for Peterkin, Sparks and their compatriots. They may not have been tourists in the usual sense, but as much as any required a means of distancing themselves from the insecurities inherent to the alien environments in which they found themselves.

**TOURIST PHOTOGRAPHS**

Essentially the camera makes everyone a tourist in other people’s reality, and eventually in one’s own (Sontag 1978: 57).

Sontag’s book *On Photography* is one of the most commonly cited texts relating to tourism and photography. In this now classic series of essays Sontag argues that tourism depends on photography to give it credibility. Drawing on Sontag’s viewpoint, photo historian Patricia Holland, in her study on photographic albums, states that the “domestication of the unfamiliar” is one of the appealing aspects of the snapshot camera to the tourist or traveller (1997: 134). Similarly, Canadian geographer Dick Gregory argues that the invention of the hand-held Kodak camera that was easy for the amateur to use made it possible for almost everyone to invade the private daily lives of others in the quest of picture taking. He argues, “popular photography came to be spliced into the performances of modern tourism” (2003: 195). Gregory further contends these Kodak-carrying tourists, as he puts it, “rendered Egypt as a transparent space that could be fully known by a colonial, colonizing gaze” (196).

One such image, entitled in its original album “Queen of Sheba” landing, and described by the National Archives of Canada as *Nursing sister Etta Sparks of No. 5 Canadian Station-
ary Hospital, R.C.A.M.C., Memphis, Egypt, 1915 (Fig. 5.9), is for me one of the most arresting photographs in the Sparks album. It shows Nurse Sparks being carried to shore from a small boat on the shoulders of two men who, from their dress and appearance, are most probably Egyptian. This is a definitive image of the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Price states that Western viewers often saw this kind of photograph as portraying Native peoples as “primitive, bizarre, barbaric or simply picturesque” (1997: 58). Sparks appears to be seated on a chair that is being carried by the two men. They have rolled up their pants legs and are walking barelegged through ankle-deep water. Sparks is wearing her nursing uniform, complete with cape and hat. Her dry-booted feet are conspicuously visible, hanging down just below her long skirt. Sparks’ smile suggests that she is enjoying or at least bemused by the experience. Three other men, two of whom also appear to be locals, watch this scene from the boat. The gesture of the third man, appereled in what seems to be a tropical suit, a tie and a peaked, military style hat, suggests that he too is amused by the scene unfolding before him. The photograph is insufficiently clear to determine his origins, Middle Eastern or European. His dress does make it appear that he is a person of some authority, however, possibly the master of the small sailing boat upon which he stands.
The question is why was Etta Sparks given this royal treatment? What made it possible for her to write the triumphal caption “Queen of Sheba landing” beneath the image in her album? That she was a nurse had something to do with it of course, but only in an incidental way. Being a nurse serving in wartime, English-speaking and, to all appearances, British, she was associated with the armed forces of the British Empire, at the time the occupiers of Egypt and the most powerful influence in the region. Egypt had been under the effective control of Britain since 1882 and in 1914 had been designated a British “protectorate,” a disingenuous colonial term that permitted the British to control Egypt’s politics and exploit its economy under the guise of protecting it from anyone else who might want to do the same thing. In short, it was a classic protection racket. Thus, if not exactly a queen, in Egypt Sparks was no doubt fully conscious that she was an agent of an imperial power. She was a lady and deserved to be treated as such, which in this case meant being carried from the boat to avoid the indignity of having to wade ashore and getting her clothes wet. In this situation, Sparks’s specific status as a nurse probably mattered very little. For both Sparks and the men carrying her, given what she represented, where she was and when she was, fully justified her “right” to act the “Queen.”
To modern eyes, "Group at Pyramids" Personnel of No. 5 Stationary Hospital visiting the Pyramids of Gizeh, 1915 (Fig. 5.10) is a typical tourist snapshot. The photograph shows two officers and two nursing sisters posed upon camels at Gizeh. One of the nurses appears to be Etta Sparks. The group is positioned in the centre of the frame; behind them are the Sphinx and, in the distance, Khafre’s Pyramid. Beside them stands the camel handler who in the context of Sparks’s album, serves to add “local colour,” and represent the exotic other.

Ostensibly, photographs of this type are made as souvenirs, memento recordings of the tourists’ visit to whatever are the scheduled wonders of the day. It matters not whether these be pyramids, palaces or pachyderms, in most cases, the result sees the monumental reduced to the status of backdrop. In effect, these kinds of images serve the same purpose as an graffiti artist’s tag, inscribing a sort of visual “I was here” across the surface of whatever landmark or icon tourist culture deems worthy. As Sontag says: “[p]hotography will offer indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had” (1978: 9). The important thing is less that one was there, but that one be seen to have been there.

The vantage point selected by the photographer who photographed Sparks and her companions was a favourite of the time. An almost identical photograph of a different group of Canadian nurses, made a year later in 1916, appeared in an exhibition presented by Trent University, Peterborough in 2001 about the wartime experiences of Helen Fowlds Marryat (1889-1996). Another similar image, made by an anonymous photographer c.1900, appears on the cover of Barbara Hodgson’s No Place for a Lady, Tales of Adventurous Women Travelers, 2002. This suggests that the photographs were either made by a local, commercial photographer or that the location had simply become a popular “Kodak spot”; in short, a “picture” waiting to happen, for anyone who chose to use it.

The symbolism of the pyramids as a destination for nurses and soldiers at this time cannot be overlooked. Classic symbols of “the architecture of death,” these enormous tombs have stood for thousands of years as monuments to death and a promise of resurrection and now act as a subject in the tradition of memento mori. This tradition both reminds us of our mortality and reflects a certain fascination with death (Etlin 1987: 3). It is ironic, although not surprising, that this group of individuals whose attention at that point in their lives was so intimately involved with killing and death, should seek escape and diversion from their wartime service by visiting such monuments. It is even less surprising that they should then photograph the episode. Sontag addresses this in her claim that photographs themselves that act as souvenirs of mortality. She writes:

All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, and mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt (1978: 15).
Surrounded by an awareness of death it is perhaps understandable to turn for comfort to the memorializing qualities of both photography and architecture.

During the same excursion a photograph captioned "A Familiar Scene, Cairo" (Fig. 5.11) was made, although by whom we cannot be sure. The use of the word "familiar" seems innocently ironic, for although doubtless familiar to those native to the place, it almost certainly was not to the soldiers and nurses who are the photograph's primary subjects. In the context of the album too, it shows an entirely different view than the other photographs made at the same general location and treats its subject in an entirely different way. The soldiers and nurses riding on camels relate it to the previous image, but here the camera has pulled back to show a much wider, far more chaotic scene. This time the army group is not the obvious centre of attention. At first glance, the compositional structure of this picture seems far less controlled than the previous one yet, although almost certainly accidental, it is in fact vastly more sophisticated. Here, the relationship between the frame and the disparate elements of its containment is almost perfect. The image succeeds in being classically picturesque without appearing to be so. On the far right, a wandering camel's head is cropped off by the frame. The foreground is occupied by numerous figures: in the centre, camel drivers wearing traditional costume; in the right foreground, three soldiers dressed in what appears to be British army uniform; to the left, an Egyptian
soldier in a darker uniform and in the deep middle-ground and background respectively, two pairs of figures, one in traditional European jackets, trousers and hats and the second, too far distant to accurately define. These groups are paired off on the right and left of the frame and lead the eye back into the almost featureless desert beyond. The Sparks group is still at the centre of the frame, but due to the reduction of scale they no longer dominate as they did in the previous image.

By pulling back from the subject party the photographer has produced what for me is a far more fascinating image. This is a picture of life in process, not just a picture of people having their picture taken. These are not people being in Egypt, but people doing in Egypt. Most particularly, unlike the earlier photograph at the pyramids, this photograph presents a dynamic complexity of interrelationships between the people assembled at the site, showing in its apparent spontaneity the interaction or, more accurately perhaps, lack of interaction between the tourists and the camel handlers. This is not the archetypal tourist snapshot in which the tourist protagonist is placed in front of the “sight” to both record their association with it and show scale; rather it is more reminiscent of a the style of “street photography” popularized by the French photojournalist Henri Cartier Bresson, who is best known for his photographs that capture what he termed the “decisive moment.” Sontag describes Cartier Bresson as a kind of Zen archer who must become one with the target in order to hit it; thinking about the images is something that he does before and after photographing, not while the exposure it being made (1978: 116). In this approach, the scene is never created for the camera but instead is excised from the larger, encompassing reality. This seems an accurate description too of this image from Sparks’s album in which bits of the rendered reality seem to be escaping across the bordering frame in all directions.

*Unidentified street cobbler, Saloniki, Greece, 1916* (Fig. 5.12) is yet another example of a type of photograph that has become a classic of the tourist picturesque image genre. Making or collecting these images that present peoples from a visited foreign land as an exotic other is a way of confirming the superiority and power of the tourist traveller. In motivation, it is little different from the hunter who shoots wild animals in order subsequently to display their stuffed and mounted carcasses. The subtext of the trophy animal is that this large, fearsome or fast creature is dead and I’m not, meaning that as it’s killer I must be superior. The sum of the messages carried by the tourist photograph is similar, if rather more complex, there usually being a number of different subtexts. In the case of Peterkin’s photograph, for example, the sitting man has been photographed from above, which diminishes his stature and makes him appear subordinate to the photographer. The difference between photographer and subject will be reinforced when the photograph is displayed in Peterkin’s album and be emphasized even further when she shows the album to others. At this point, just like the hunter’s trophy, the photograph clearly attests to her superiority. She is here and has acquired his image, leaving its subject forever sitting in
the street, on the ground, in the dirt, surrounded by crude tools and simple shoes. Besides power, this is also a study of class. Peterkin was English speaking, well educated, a member of an elite profession. Even at home she belonged to a superior social class, and when abroad, engaged in military service, she could add representative of the British Empire as well. The cobbler, a street vendor, is a member of the working poor in a foreign country that she can visit, but he has obviously been unable to leave. Thus, as British sociologist John Urry says, “[there is] a separation between the one who does the looking, assumed to be familiar and like ‘us,’ and that which is looked at, assumed to be different and strange.” Urry describes this as the tourist gaze (Holland 1997:113).

A further example from Peterkin’s album is captioned Newlyweds, Greece, 1916 (Fig. 5.13). It shows a man and a woman dressed in traditional Greek clothing standing before a rough, stone wall. They pose beside each other with their arms hanging loosely at their sides. Both look directly into the camera. Another man stands in the shadows in the background, but it is hard to know whether he is a member of the wedding party or not. The groom appears much older than the bride who stands passively beside him. Without the
caption, it would be easy to assume that he was her father rather than her partner. Everything about this image suggests that it was unplanned — an opportunistic snapshot resulting from an accidental convergence of photographer and event. There is nothing in the response of the subjects to suggest a familiarity with the photographer. Neither appears welcoming in any way. They do not smile; in fact, they give no hint that they are being anything other than tolerant or at the very most, accepting. What results is an image that has nothing to do with portraiture and everything to do with the acquisition of cultural stereotypes. Although made by an amateur, the underlying motivation for this photograph is almost indistinguishable from that which led Jochelson Brodskaya to take the image of the two Yukahir women cited in the previous chapter (Fig. 4.12). As Gregory writes:

In turning their gaze upon human figures constructed as “types,” photographers abstracted these subjects from their own continuing histories and transformed them into taxonomy where they were exhibited as exemplars of a timeless “Orient” (2003: 224).

Peterkin’s photograph, then, tells the viewer nothing about these people, not their names, not who they are, nothing about their individual lives. Instead, when it finds its final destination in her album it becomes simply one more example of Greek-ness.

Women working in the fields near Saloniki, Greece, 1916 (Fig. 5.14) is an image of a group of women bending to harvest a crop. To those familiar with European painting, it is immediately reminiscent of Jean-Francois Millet’s social realist painting The Gleaners (1857). Apart from its subject matter, the photograph links to the Millet through its use of classical simplicity and its compositional formalism. Both the Millet painting and Peterkin’s photograph are less a social criticism of the back-breaking labour of these women than they are pictorial studies unified through their repetition of the forms of the stooping women, whose bending backs echo the curve of the distant mountain. The real emphasis here is on the formally constructed “picture,” not the reality of the scene that has been photographed.

The way in which Peterkin has photographed these women has produced an image that conforms to a pictorial genre known as the vernacular picturesque. One of the characteristics of this genre is that representations of people carefully avoid emphasizing any physical markers associated with the assignment of individuality or personality. A similar subject appears in the painting Canadian Women Working in the Field, produced in 1916 by Mandy Macdonald and cited in Sandra Gwyn’s book, Tapestry of War, A Private View of
Canadians in the Great War (1992). Gwyn describes the women workers in Macdonald’s painting as “Farmerettes who dressed outlandishly in boots and breeches” who were recruited to harvest crops (440). Although women did engage in such manual labour in Canada, it would not have been an acceptable activity for a well-educated, middle-class women like Peterkin. Griselda Pollock deconstructs the pose of bending women; she notes that this is a pose of the working-class woman as the “bourgeois lady” would be disciplined both by “whalebone” and convention not to stoop in such a manner (1999: 47)." Once again this is an image about power and superiority. Peterkin, the photographer, confirms the status of these women as peasants by documenting them engaged in stereotypical, backbreaking, physical labour in the fields.

I shall consider one final photograph by Peterkin: Nurse on a donkey, Greece, 1916 (Fig. 5.15). The image appears to have been made on a field trip or outing for the nursing sisters. It shows Peterkin posing sidesaddle on a donkey beside a small, elderly woman who from her dress, appears to be Greek. The woman has been spinning wool with a drop spindle and appears to be holding this up to show to the camera. To the right, another nurse can be observed beneath a small awning. She is engaged in some form of activity, but it is not possible to tell exactly what it is.
This is an enigmatic image in that there is clearly a story or perhaps several stories to this scene, each having beginnings, middles and ends, yet the image itself poses many questions and gives few answers: Where is this place? What were these two — or is it three, because somebody must have taken the picture — nurses doing in this relatively featureless landscape? Where did the donkey come from? Who owns it? Does it perhaps belong to the old woman spinning wool. And what is she doing there anyway? And so on. All of which makes this a typical tourist snapshot, for tourist images are never meant to stand alone. They are intended for presentation to others, at which time their author will elaborate upon their content, filling in the gaps and responding to questions. These are not narratives in themselves, but supporting illustrations.

Gregory points out that tourists generally only photograph themselves with local inhabitants when they want to demonstrate some kind of nominal claim over them: “our’ dragoman or ‘my’ donkey boy” (2003: 218). Such a patronizing attitude is clearly present in this image. The older woman is included in the frame here as a curiosity, or perhaps simply because she owns the donkey. Like the cobbler and the wedding couple, she too becomes a collected specimen for Peterkin’s gallery of “Greeks.” This collecting behaviour, according to Culler, is typical of the tourist:

All over the world the unsung armies of semiotics, the tourists are fanning out in search of the signs of Frenchness, typical Italian behaviour, exemplary Oriental scenes, typical American thruways, traditional English pubs; and, deaf to the natives explanation that thruways are an efficient way to get from one place to another, or that pubs are simply convenient places to meet your friends and have a drink, or that gondolas are a natural way to get around in a city full of canals, tourists persist in regarding these objects and practices as cultural signs (1988: 155).

In this way, through their photographs, tourists are simultaneously indicators of established stereotypes and the creators of new ones.

Gregory too reminds us that the search for “the picturesque was a leit motiv of Orientalism tourism” (2003: 212). Amateur photographers and artists streamed to exotic locations in search of opportunities to record views and scenes that were picturesque. They went in search of a subject or landscape that made a pleasing picture or view. Gregory cites as evidence the writings of a woman traveler, Amelia Edwards, who was exploring Egypt in the 1870s. Edwards’ comments are typical of the colonial gaze. She writes:

Every shopfront, every street corner, every turbaned group is a ready-made picture. The old Turk who sets up his cake-stall in the recess of a sculptured doorway; the donkey-boy with his gaily caparisoned ass, waiting for customers; the beggar asleep on the steps of a mosque; the veiled woman filling her jar at the public fountain — they all look as if they had been put there expressly to be painted (as quoted in Gregory 2003: 212).
The colonial gaze searches for the picturesque or ideal view that renders the "tourist experience" as something that can be neatly delineated by the viewfinder. Looking through the viewfinder establishes a gaze from a privileged position, a position of power and security. The resultant photograph serves as evidence.

It is not surprising that Peterkin and Sparks used photography and the creation of photo albums as a means of helping them come to terms with the dislocation of their overseas posting as wartime nursing sisters. In this they were little different from any camera-carrying traveller before or since. More striking is the way in which these albums also function as constructed narratives that unequivocally imbue their creators with an identity as professional women working outside their traditional, socially assigned, domestic roles. Striking too is the almost complete absence of any direct reference to the war itself, particularly given that their work must have brought them into daily contact with its more horrific results. Where the war does intrude, it does so only by implication, as a subtext to the larger and to its authors' obviously more important narrative task of documenting their constructed view of their role in relationship to it. The other related and unequivocal message running throughout these albums is that the fact of their makers' enforced exile from the security and familiarities of home was far more significant to them than the cause of it; a clear example of the individual personal trumping the collective political. Thus those images in the albums made outside the work environment, that is when the women identified as travellers rather than nurses, present primarily as a representational discourse on confrontations with the foreign and the exotic and in their form and sensibility are virtually indistinguishable from those of any ordinary tourist.

FIGURE 5.15
Ruby Gordon Peterkin. Nurse on a Donkey, Greece, 1916, gelatin silver print, PA 149876