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

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Citation for published version (APA):

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CONTEXTS, CONTACTS AND CODES OF PRODUCTION

There is no more suitable work for a woman than photography, whether she takes it up with a view of making it a profession, or simply as a delightful pastime to give pleasure to herself and others. The light, delicate touch of a woman, the eye for light and shade, together with her artistic perception, render her unusually fitted to succeed in this work (Hines cited in Wilkinson 1980: 29).

For a woman to use a camera is a kind of theft of power, an assertion of the right to value her own capacities of observation and judgment, rather than simply to sustain someone else’s exercise of these functions. For perhaps the first time in her existence she is able to affect a crucial shift in her thinking, to conceive of how she looks more nearly in the sense of how she sees, rather than how she appears (Butler 1987: 24).

In a speech delivered to the Art League of Mobile, Alabama in January, 1899, Richard Hines Jr. offered his opinion that photography could be considered an appropriate activity for women, whether as a genteel accomplishment or a commercial venture, provided these women do not leave the boundaries of the domestic sphere. In this he spoke as a “man of his times,” fully prepared to accept women as photographers while insisting that, should they choose to pursue such a venture, they do so only to the extent permitted by the constraints imposed upon their gender by Victorian society. Given this attitude, it is not surprising that until recently, photographic histories presented the medium as having been almost exclusively a male occupation with women, where mentioned at all,
being portrayed as playing more passive roles, either as product or consumer.

British photography writer Susan Butler’s statement is an example of the application of revisionist methodology and current feminist theory to the analysis of nineteenth-century photographic practice. Although separated by almost 90 years, Hines’s and Butler’s statements enunciate graphically contrasting understandings of why women at the time might have been attracted to the practice of photography: on the one hand, because of prevailing stereotypes that assigned to women a natural affinity for the genteel and the aesthetic and on the other, that the use of a camera provides a woman the opportunity to assert power by giving her, quite literally, a point of view from which to re-present not only her own image, but that of the larger world as well.

Despite limitations imposed by Victorian patriarchy and societal conditions and expectations, there is no doubt that for some women, photography became a tool that enabled them to present their own narrative through the images they made. Furthermore, the diverse interactions between women and the practice of photography facilitated their “ability to act in the public domain,” a capacity that Carolyn G. Heilbrun, citing Myra Jehlen in her Writing a Woman’s Life, describes as being essential to a woman’s “selfhood,” that is, her right to tell her own story. (1988: 17). Heilbrun continues her discussion of women’s biography by describing the importance of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have described as “the quest for her own story” (18). In this study I argue that this quest is clearly apparent throughout the substantial bodies of work left to us by the women photographers active in Canada around 1900 and, as such, evidences a profound change in photographic culture.

This chapter considers the positioning, representation and contextualization of Canadian women working in photography in the nineteenth century. It examines the increase toward the century’s end in the number designated as professionals, rather than amateurs, and identifies the factors of resistance and marginalization that had to be overcome by women seeking to make that transition. The chapter is divided into two sections: amateur photographers, encompassing ways by which women gained access to the medium, the support systems available to them and their areas of production and, women considered to have been professionals, the context within which they worked and their production.

According to Canadian historians Diana Pedersen and Martha Phemister, until the introduction of more accessible technologies such as roll film and simple-to-operate Kodak cameras in the 1880s, prevailing societal attitudes toward gender and technology “militated” against women playing more active roles in photography. “Women’s place in the photographer’s studio during the early years (following the medium’s introduction to Canada in the 1840s) was, for the most part, in front of the camera rather than behind it” (1990: 90). Women were commonly depicted in a number of stereotypical roles and poses that included woman-as-object or woman-as-mother. The portrait of Miss Annie Bell, 1872 (Fig. 6.1), an employee in the Montréal studio of William Notman, is typical of the
images made of women throughout this period. Like the portrait of Mrs. William McKenzie (Fig. 1.2), also made by Notman, this photograph is also an example of the attempted objectification of women by what John Berger refers to as the male gaze. This time the objectification is less completely successful, for in this instance, a careful analysis of the image shows that it signifies much more than a stereotype. Despite the fact that Miss Bell is a working woman, she is shown costumed in party dress, presented not as herself but as a decorative object. The medium of photography transforms the young woman from working class to that of an individual with the status of a lady. In addition to her frilly costume, she is surrounded by props that confirm she is in an upper-class interior. A detailed statue of an exotic bird sits on a table at the left edge of the frame. A spindle chair is placed in front of her with an elaborately embroidered shawl folded casually over its back. She holds a delicately carved fan in her right hand. All these luxury items imply the privileges of a middle- or upper-class household.

The young woman looks directly into the camera with a slightly detached expression. Her gaze acknowledges the photographer and his camera, yet she does not respond to him. There is not even the trace of a smile on her lips. Miss Bell exemplifies what critical theorist Judith Butler describes as gender performativity (1999[1990]): She is performing a feminine upper-class identity with the use of costume, a studio backdrop and props. Her immediate audience is the man behind the camera. She plays out her role of a decorative muse as he has instructed her. Unamused by this play-acting, she is compliant; Notman is her employer. She is not a lady, only a shop girl playing dress-up. And read now some 130 years after it was made her image becomes the site of her resistance. Her hesitant yet defiant gaze back to the camera firmly contradicts the photographer’s attempt to portray his subject as passive and decorative. In the same way as the woman in Irving Penn’s Mother and Child, Cuzco, Peru (Fig. 2.3) analyzed in Chapter Two, Bell is able to subvert the male gaze by returning it. To contemporary eyes, this image reveals much more than a simply stereotypical objectification of women.

I am also attracted to another of Notman’s images of women. Mrs. Sang Kee and Children, Montreal, 1897 (Fig. 6.2) is a complex image depicting both motherhood and a non

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1 See Salih (2002) ch. 2 on Gender.
2 See Bal (1996:220) for an explanation of the returned gaze and its impact.
Euro-Canadian subject. In this captivating image, the subject is a young Chinese mother with her baby and small son. Like Miss Bell, already discussed, she is objectified by the camera as a decorative object. Her wearing of traditional Chinese clothing emphasizes her exoticism. She looks calmly and directly into the camera. In contrast, her tiny son is more hesitant about the experience and stays close to his mother's side. Here her individual identity is subordinated to her role as exotic other and mother. This is typical of many such photographs of the period in which a woman's role as a “wife” and mother wholly superseded her individual identity. In this portrait the woman is signed as woman-as-mother, rendered as a product of the male gaze. Rosenblum confirms that motherhood as a theme was one of the most popular portrait subjects of the period (1984).

Amateur and professional male photographers alike often included their wives in their landscape photographs. However, both the distance at which these women were placed from the camera and their placement within the “view” suggest strongly that for the most part, they were secondary subjects, included to establish scale and contribute a decorative addition to the composition. Richard Maynard's 1899 landscape photograph in which he employs his partner Hannah in this way is a typical, if curiously ironic, example, since Hannah was not only a professional photographer in her own right, but also his mentor in the medium (Fig. 6.3) (Watson 1992: n.p.).

One of the significant factors contributing to the acceptance of photography as an appropriate, womanly pursuit was the interest in the medium shown by the most influential woman of the age, Queen Victoria, who came to the throne in 1838, just a few months before the public introduction of photography. Following her example, by the 1850s many women in North America and Europe were actively engaged in “cartomania,” the collecting of portraits of family, friends and celebrities often in the form of carte de visite (Pedersen and Phemister 1990: 95). And in the 1860s, they collected stereographs, three-dimensional views, usually of British and European monuments and beauty spots or the exotic lands and peoples of the ever-expanding British Empire. Victoria was not just a
collector, however. She was herself an enthusiastic amateur image-maker and even had the royal photographer, Roger Fenton, set up a darkroom for her in Windsor Castle (Hall, Dodds and Triggs 1993: 13).

While this royal approval of the medium sparked the interest of many Victorian women, only those very few who also had some independence of position and means could afford to explore the creative potentials of the medium. For most of the nineteenth century, women's active involvement with photography was limited to the secondary position of either amateur photographer or employee in commercial photographic studios. It was not until the 1880s and the introduction of roll film, hand-holdable cameras and commercially available processing that relatively large numbers of women were able to begin making pictures of their own. As technology advanced, women were, however, a significant presence in the development of this medium and were active in a variety of significant roles in Canada.

There was also a more content-based reason for this. The principal focus of amateur photography was the documentation of the family, and women usually undertook this. As chief family archivists, women carefully maintained the family photographic albums, recording every day domestic events and significant rituals and rites of passage such as weddings and births. Such intimate family documents provide a personal and private view into Canadian life at the turn of the century.

As amateur photographers, women established a feminine voice or narrative through their visual images that recorded both social history and the “woman’s culture” of their period. C. Jane Gover writes, “The camera presents a new way for women to represent and record their lives. The photo album replaced the sampler, the quilt and the miniature portrait” (1988: 12). As this quotation suggests, making photographs and collecting them in albums is an activity in which autobiography and artistic production were integrated. Photo-historian Beaumont Newhall praises Lady Elizabeth Eastlake for her essay “Photography 1857” as arriving “at the surprisingly modern conclusion” that photography is “a new medium of communication” (Eastlake cited in Newhall 1980: 94). Photography was thus viewed as a tool of communication or voice as early as the mid-nineteenth century. The majority of women employed in the commercial studios were support staff. However,
as this chapter will establish, an increasing number of women did become professional photographers.

**FRAMING CHANGE**

The turn of the nineteenth century in Canada marked a time of significant social change for Canadian women. The Victorian age had seen women primarily as domestic figures defined by family responsibilities within the private sphere. Victorian women were schooled by the ideology of feminine accomplishment and passivity. Domestic femininity as "the preferred mode of womanhood" was exemplified by the roles of dependent daughter, "wife" or mother in the nineteenth century (1993: 120). Deborah Cherry comments that by the middle of the century, domestic femininity had positioned itself in a variety of sites from the new category "wife" on the census records to the large quantity of literature that dealt with issues of behaviour, language and appearance of a lady. According to Cherry the term "lady" gained currency after 1840, "shorn from its eighteenth-century aristocratic associations" and increasingly used to denote middle-class feminine conduct as opposed to birth or rank (120).

After 1830, it was apparent that the public and private spheres were differentiated by gender:

While femininity was assigned to home and family, masculinity by contrast was apportioned the public world of city streets and urban institutions, administration, finance and paid productive labour (121).

The twentieth century, however, brought opportunities for the "New Woman" in the public sphere. For many women, photography provided a bridge between the private domestic world and the wider public sphere:

[The] choice of photography made the professional life somewhat easier... The dilemma over career and marriage, for example was often avoided; women were able to pursue a career without necessarily leaving the domestic environment. Even for amateurs the camera gave women the chance to experiment with an example of the new technology while affirming domestic values in the pictures they took (Gover 1988: 133).

Photo-historian William C. Darrah observes certain patterns in the careers of early American women photographers. He suggests that women gained entrance to the photographic profession in a variety of ways: through inheritance, family business, as support staff who worked their way up in a commercial studio or through paid instruction from an established professional. Darrah's observations are, in Pederson and Phemister's view, equally valid for the careers of women photographers in Ontario and, by extension, to women photographers in all parts of Canada (1990: 97). Pedersen and Phemister argue that despite the positive response of women toward photography, this technology "was initially used
in accordance with pre-existing gender roles, and consequently, came to reinforce those gender role” (97). Gover concurs:

If indeed every age needs an image, then the late Victorians found their reflection in the photography produced by the women of that period. And, for the most part, the women photographers confirmed the prevailing societal view of their work (1988:133).

This prevailing view of women's work was one that restricted women to the private sphere of the home. After 1860, the boundaries gradually expanded to include charitable work or paid employment where deemed appropriate (Cherry 1993:121).

Once established as practitioners, women were free to choose their own codes of production. Codes of production reflected stylistic conventions and varied from romantic pictorial imagery to the more documentary. Marketing techniques of the photo industry tended to reinforce the notion that women were merely the “rank amateur and passive consumer” (Pedersen and Phemister 1990:89).

Examination of women and photography in Ontario suggests that in the early years, women's responses to photographic technology clearly differed from those of men, and that they did so in a manner which reflected social convictions about women's scientific and artistic abilities, women's role in the family, women's relationship to other women, and women's economic importance as consumers. Later, promoters of photography simply elaborated on these themes in their marketing of new forms of photographic technology. Not only did they use different promotional strategies to reach female camera buyers, but they also employed women in advertisements as an effective strategy for conveying the impression that cameras were easy to use (90).

In 1901, George Eastman launched an advertising campaign in an attempt to target the women's market by presenting the Kodak Girl, a “New Woman” symbol representing “the idealized essence of contemporary young womanhood — modern, active, elegant, sophisticated, independent, but not so bold as to be thought unrespectable” (105). The Kodak Girl was tremendously popular, and it was this image, not that of more serious amateurs like Mattie Gunterman who used more professional equipment, that was used by the photo industry as representative of women amateurs (109). “With camera in hand, this woman photographer is active and curious yet accepted and welcomed everywhere” (Gover 1988:15). The Kodak Girl became a popular and accepted symbol in society and expanded notions of acceptable behaviour for women.

Improvements that simplified the technical aspects of photography lead to an “explosion of amateur photographic activity” in Canada after 1885. Pedersen and Phemister argue that only after photographic technology became more simplified and accessible in the 1880s did women become more active participants (89). Research by Lily Koltun for the exhibition and catalogue Private Realms of Light indicated that of the 825
amateur photographers identified as being active at the end of the nineteenth century, only about seven percent were women. Koltun herself is suspicious of this figure, however, and suggests that the low percentage reflects only information available through periodicals, camera-club documents and other public records. It is her belief that that women may have approached the medium privately and therefore large numbers may have been omitted from the public record (1983: 55).

Women often first engaged with photography through the instruction of a mentor who was generally a male family member. One of the best known was the American photographer Alfred Stieglitz, long considered by many American photo-historians to have been the “father” of modern photography. In addition to his role as curator of the 291 Gallery that exhibited modern art and photography in New York, Stieglitz was an influential photographer and leader of the Photo-Secession. Stieglitz adopted a patriarchal role, mentoring dozens of women photographers. In Canada, no mentor achieved the cult figure status of Stieglitz. Instead, Canadian women photographers found their mentors closer to home. Millie Gamble (1887–unknown) began photographing in the summer of 1904, at the age of 17. She had been given a Ray No. 1 camera by an uncle (Jones 1983: 22). Annie Grey McDougall (1866–1952) first encountered photography through her brother-in-law Charles Millar, an amateur photographer. She bought her first camera from William Notman in 1888. McDougall also received camera and darkroom instruction from the Notman Montreal Studio (14).

The camera club was the center of much of the flurry of photographic activity at the turn of the nineteenth century and was the primary support system for the amateur photographer. It was not uncommon for well-established male professionals, including William Notman, to join camera clubs. The fear of lost business caused by amateur photographers encouraged many professional photographers to join camera clubs in order to exert their influence and make further business contacts (Robertson 1983: 18). Most of the activities of camera clubs were male dominated, but many amateur women photographers also wished to gain access to the benefits derived from club membership. These included the use of darkroom and library facilities, lectures by prominent photographers and the opportunity to exhibit their photographs and receive criticism about them (Gover 1988: 69). Their interest in attending lectures and learning more technique conveys what archivist Peter Robertson refers to as “a certain Victorian desire for perpetual self-improvement” (1983: 23).

By 1890, camera clubs began to accept women both as a way to expand membership and to “create a more sociable atmosphere at meetings” (Jones 1983: 6). Female membership was often subject to restrictions, however, an example being having darkroom use limited to daytime hours. The treatment of women in photographic associations such as camera clubs reflected the gender-oriented world of late Victorian America and Canada.

10 See Koltun ed. (1983) for the catalogue for the National Archives of Canada exhibition, Private Realms of Light, for the definite study to date of amateur photography in Canada.

11 Photo-Secession was an organization of primarily American pictorial photographers that existed from 1902 to 1910. It was a “distinctive offshoot of the Pictorial movement that promoted art photography and allowed for darkroom manipulation of negatives and prints using a variety of graphic arts techniques. It represented the elite among photographic societies and was the North American equivalent of the Linked Ring in Great Britain. Women accounted for 21 of the 105 members in the Photo-Secession. The eventual rejection of commercial photography by this society caused its most celebrated woman member, the professional portrait photographer, Gertrude Kasebier, to leave the group.” See Rosenblum (1984: 95–97).

12 See Gover (1988: 86–103) for a discussion of Stieglitz’s role as mentor in the development of women photographers in America.
Camera clubs were, in fact, male dominated and while active as exhibitors, women's position in the clubs were often at the forbearance of the male members. "Proper ladies," unlike the marginal artistic, literary, or career women, were generally accepted as members, if not for high executive positions. Their treatment in the clubs was consistent with prevailing social practices observable in male/female relationships generally (Gover 1988: 69).

In Canada the only club on record to make an issue of women's membership was the Toronto Camera Club, which debated the admission of women on November 18, 1895 (Robertson 1983: 22). A motion to accept women members was approved at a special general meeting held one week later. At the annual general meeting of 1895-6, three women, Helen Beardmore, "Miss E. Lee and Miss McGraw," were added to the membership. It was not until 1902 that another woman, Mary Elizabeth McKeggie, was granted admission.

The Montreal Camera Club was formed in 1893 with Evelyn Johnston, a niece of the English pictorialist photographer J. Duley Johnston, as one of the early members. The club states in its charter: "The club shows a courteous spirit towards the fair sex, ladies being eligible to membership and also to hold office" (Jones 1983: 7). Mrs. C. Lambert of Montreal was the only Canadian woman photographer included in Sidney Carter's "Photo-Club of Canada" exhibition in 1907 (Koltun 1983: 44). Sidney Carter, a leading Canadian pictorialist and an associate member of the Photo-Secession in New York, had independently organized and curated an exhibition of pictorial photography for the Art Association of Montreal that was presented from November 23 to December 7, 1907. The catalogue stated that the exhibition was arranged by the "Photo-Club of Canada," a mythic entity created at the suggestion of the secretary of the Art Association in case the exhibition was unsuccessful. The exhibition was considered a novelty and was received favorably (55). The camera clubs in Canada, at the turn of the nineteenth century, did provide a limited form of support system for the small number of women who had the opportunity and resources to become members. There is little documentation about support networks in Canada for women photographers at the turn of the nineteenth century as compared to those functioning during the same time period in the United States.

Pictorialism, institutionalized by camera clubs, exhibitions and "salons," was the most significant movement in Canadian photography after 1900, slowly replacing the realism, which was popularized in the nineteenth century.13 As Koltun argues, it sought to be considered as an art form:

Pictorialism sought to emulate traditional art media by using broad compositional design, suppression of detail, atmospheric effect, selective highlighting, and diffused or "soft" focus to create photographs that could be judged as works of art... These images looked little like photographs, and much more like charcoal sketches, or distant cousins of paintings and prints (1983: 32).
However prominent, the pictorialists did not dominate the practice of amateur photography in Canada; this was reserved for the so-called “straight” photographers who preferred a more documentary style image.

The principal area of production for the amateur woman photographer was not the camera club with its exhibitions; instead, it was the creation of the family album. The task of family archivist or keeper of the family album traditionally fell to the women family members. These albums contained the family chronicle and collection of cartes de visite that included well-known figures of the time. Photo-historian Alan Thomas describes the family album “as a living social document ... unique in its concrete, visual record of worlds of past experience” (1981: 43). As Pedersen and Phemister have suggested:

Looking at photographs and albums, and perhaps sharing and exchanging images with friends, came to be seen as activities that were particularly appropriate for leisureed women, ranking with novel reading, letter writing and fancy needlework. In fact, it was common for photographers, in selecting props appropriate to their subject, to pose female subjects much more frequently than males with a photograph album, a stereoscope, or holding photographs in their hands (1990: 95).

Marianne Hirsch bases her analysis of the family album on their self-reflexivity “as a practice that produces and reproduces ideologies” (1997: 12). The ideology of the family album was discussed in detail in Chapter One with regard to the amateur photographer, Mattie Gunterman, and her portrayal of life in interior British Columbia at the turn of the nineteenth century.¹⁴

Photographs made by amateur women photographers are often straightforward documents of family and friends. Most of the subject matter offers a view into the private domestic environment and often displays intimate images that reveal much about the social history of the time. Family images, particularly those documenting children and their activities, are typical of this genre. In one such domestic image (Fig. 6.4) the

¹⁴ See also Langford (2001) discussed in ch.5.
photographer mother improvised a studio setting by elevating the child in a tub onto a chair and, using a neutral wall as a backdrop, created a record of the bath-time ritual for the family album. It is ironic that in the attempt to get a “professional” studio look for her baby portrait, the mother ignores basic safety precautions and puts the child at considerable risk by precariously balancing the tub on the chair. This image by an amateur photographer, identified only as Mrs. Wentworth Martin, is from a series in the collection of the National Archives of Canada. Other images in the same series include such mundane domestic snapshots as the baby in a pram, the baby in a chair and the baby with a rocking horse. All conform to a similar, basic composition and feature the child with one simple prop that relates to the activity being documented.

Some women amateurs were more advanced in their photographic knowledge and had their own darkrooms. Millie Gamble is a typical example. Between 1905 and 1920 she was a teacher who lived on Prince Edward Island. Her photographs of students and family offer insight into the day-to-day life of the island community. Typical of the simple facilities used by women amateur photographers, Gamble produced pictures in a darkroom that she set up in her pantry and, after processing, washed prints outside to be at the pump (Jones 1983: 23).

One of the strengths of work by women photographers was that much of it combined straightforward records of everyday life and often documented contemporary news or social issues. As a result, the work of women photographers was a frequent feature of popular illustrated periodicals such as the Canadian Pictorial or the Canadian Courier. Despite this, even today these women are seldom accorded the status of professionals. Photographer Madge Macbeth is exemplary. A frequent contributor to the Canadian Courier, her superb 1913 series of images of the Connaught races in Ottawa is now in the photography collection of the National Archives of Canada. In that institution’s catalogue, however, Madge Macbeth is described as an amateur photographer.

What we would now consider tourist photography presented another popular arena of production. A journey into the countryside increasingly became a popular leisure activity after the middle of the nineteenth century. Among these tourists were women artists seeking landscape as subject matter. Landscape painting, however, was seen as a luxury commodity in the capitalist economy of the nineteenth century. Photography appeared to be the logical alternative as it made the production of landscape imagery more accessible (Cherry 1993: 165-6). Collecting of photographic views of landscape was a popular pastime for the ever “-acquiring” Victorian. Indeed, what became the conventions of pictorial photography derived largely from an attempt to create a kind of idealized view that could be created by painters.

Tourist photography was, however, less accessible to women because of the attitude of Victorian society toward women travelling alone. In her book Spinsters Abroad: Victorian Lady Explorers, Dea Birkett describes the challenges encountered by women who wished

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15 Although Madge Macbeth is identified by the National Archives of Canada as an amateur photographer, she was also a professional journalist. See Dean and Fraser (1991: 57).

16 This relates to the concept of the picturesque discussed in ch 5.
to travel, both in society and on actual journeys. Birkett cites a verse published in *Punch* (1839) that neatly encapsulates the societal restrictions on women travellers that were to prevail throughout the age:

A lady an explorer? a traveller in skirts?
The notion's just a trifle too seraphic.
Let them stay and mind the babies, or hem our ragged shirts:
But they mustn't, can't and shan't be geographic (1989: 179).

Men, “privileged by the social organization of bourgeois masculinity,” found it easier to travel freely (169).

Late nineteenth-century technical improvements, such as the pocket camera and roll film, allowed tourists and travellers to more easily make visual records of their journeys. In 1906 Henrietta Constantine, who often traveled with her spouse, a member of the North West Mounted Police, admitted being a “Kodak-fiend — though I only began last June.”  

Constantine produced postcard-size photographs probably using a convenient No. 3A Folding Kodak camera (52).

In Chapter Five, I analyzed the photograph albums of Etta Sparks and Ruby Gordon Peterkin made during the First World War. These albums include both tourist shots and documents of the Canadian army hospitals where these women were stationed as nursing sisters. Both used the camera as a tool to frame and thereby establish control over a place foreign to her. They also both made photographs while holidaying away from their stations. Koltun confirms that “exotic locales and inhabitants” were a popular subject for amateur photographers (53). Koltun cites the example of Geraldine Moodie, who photographed the Inuit in the Hudson Bay district of the Canadian North. Once again, Moodie is positioned as an amateur instead of the professional photographer that she was.

Women were successful as photographers who documented the private sphere. They were able to record everyday life and then edit it into photo albums thereby creating their own visual narrative of their lives. They created family archives that maintained a record of the family memory. Art historian and founding director of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, Martha Langford, considers the photography album to function as a “pictorial aide memoire to recitation, to the telling of stories” (2001: 5). The camera thus made available to women a socially accepted form of self-expression that permitted them to tell their own family stories. As many of these personal albums have become public through their inclusion in collections such as the National Archives of Canada, it is now possible to access significant numbers of these to read these images as cultural texts that contain much information about the lives of the women who made them.


18 See Dern and Fraser (1991: 70) for reference to the Irene Peterkin collection in the Manuscript Division of the National Archives of Canada (MG 30, E160). Letters to Irene from her sister, Ruby G. Peterkin, detail the living and working conditions in the Canadian medical stations in France and Greece during World War I. References include the difficulty of acquiring film and darkroom supplies while stationed overseas.

19 This issue is also addressed in ch. 2 and ch. 4.
WOMEN AS PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHERS

This section focuses on issues of context and production as they pertain to professional women deemed to be photographers in Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This discussion is informed by Cherry’s study of professionalism and women painters in Victorian Britain (1993). Cherry argues that professionalism was a new form of identity for women artists in nineteenth-century Britain that became attainable as new institutions were formed for middle-class occupations in addition to the older professions of law, medicine and the church. Nevertheless, according to Cherry, it was still a struggle for women to become professional:

Formal organizations set up outside the home controlled access and entry, provided specialist training and regulated professional practice. Professionalism was most vociferously claimed as masculine ... femininity was positioned as the very antithesis of the professional artist, as amateur, a definition secured by the inclusion in a middle class woman’s education of the domestic practice of drawing and watercolours as an accomplishment, a component of femininity (9).

Although only a marginal presence, women were active as professional practitioners of photography. As early as 1841, only a few months after the introduction of photography in North America, Canadian newspapers published advertisements for Mrs. Fletcher, “Professor and Teacher of the Photogenic Art” who claimed she was “prepared to execute Daguerreotype Miniatures in a style unsurpassed by an American or European artist.”20 Ralph Greenhill states that Mrs. Fletcher, while not the only woman photographer during the daguerreotype era in Canada, was probably the first (1979: 24). Unfortunately, only advertisements for her work have survived. As it was not common practice for daguerreotypists to sign their work, no identified Fletcher daguerreotypes exist (Jones 1983:5).

Women photographers were credited by society as better representing children and family groupings and were considered to have greater patience and more sensitivity with children. Many Victorian women photographers, like painters of this period, maintained elegant in-home studios that were meant to put the sitter at ease (Gover 1990: 30). The home studio was a place and context allowed women by Victorian patriarchy and reflects the stereotyping prevalent in this society; such home studios were practical particularly for women as heavy equipment did not have to be hauled about and the photographer could be available to her children (Jones 1983: 6).

As Jones points out, women preferred to use either the carte de visite or cabinet card format for their photographs.21 These images were printed on albumen paper, which allowed for subsequent retouching and handcolouring. The commercial portraits of Mrs. Amy James of Belleville exemplify the typical studio work of the 1860s, using as they do artificial props and painted backgrounds (Jones 1933: 5). For examples of such portraits,
see Figs. 6.5 and 6.6. The images were printed as small cabinet cards designed to fit into specially made photograph albums. The poses were stiff and formal, more accommodating to the necessarily long exposures than to the comfort of the sitters. Women often stood to show off their dresses as we see, for example, in Fig. 6.5. Women photographers like Amy James continued the formal posing used by their male peers. Props such as chairs and tables were commonplace in professional photographs; they were used in an attempt to make the photographer's studio appear more home-like. Amateur women photographers such as Mrs. Wentworth Martin adopted the use of props and backdrops in an attempt to make their photographs appear more professional. Mattie Gunterman, who was also an “amateur” photographer, albeit a particularly insightful and talented one, also relied on props to create images for her family album.

Occasionally, women photographers recorded subject matter beyond the domestic portrait setting. One such exception was Mary Spencer (d.1938), the owner of the only photographic studio in Kamloops, British Columbia, who documented “one of British Columbia’s sensational historic events, the capture and trial of train robber Bill Miner in 1906” (Cobb and Morgan 1978: 16). Spencer’s photographic coverage of the event allowed her access into courtroom, where women were ordinarily barred. Photography allowed her to bend the rules of Victorian society toward the proper place for a woman to work.

23 It was common practice during this period for commercial photographers to represent themselves as artists. A speech on women’s rights by Lucy Stone outlined in the Semi-Weekly Leader in March, 1855 presents the example of a successful woman photographer who became a “daguerrean artist” and “ere long was earning thousands of dollars by her profession” Koltun (1978: 262).

24 For discussion of Gunterman’s use of props see ch. 1 and ch. 2.
The earlier section on amateur photographic practice confirms that women were able to subvert the prevailing negative attitudes of the age toward women travellers. Edith Watson (1861-1943) was a freelance photographer who travelled throughout Canada from the mid 1890s until 1930. Her subjects reflected a broad range of Canadian society: rural Quebec in 1910, Doukhobours in 1911, Mennonites on the prairies and clam diggers in Cape Breton. Her work appeared in a variety of Canadian publications, thus situating her as professional rather than an amateur. Edith Watson, like Geraldine Moodie, has been marginalized as an amateur in major publications such as the National Archives of Canada’s major exhibition catalogue on the practice of amateur photography in Canada, *Private Realms of Light: Amateur Photography in Canada, 1839-1940*. This marginalization confirms, once again, the need for the re-positioning of Canadian women photographers active at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Cherry comments that women often became involved with painting in Victorian times simply because it was the family business (1993: 19). As noted by William C. Darrah, American photo-historian, this was true too for photography, as a family business was also an entrance to this medium for women (Cited in Pederson and Phemister 1990: 97). Joining the family business was an acceptable entry into the public domain for a Victorian woman. In contrast, unless she was in a partnership established through
family or marriage, a woman running her business independently was not perceived favourably by society. Partnership with her spouse or a brother, however, made a woman's involvement in commercial photography acceptable:

[M]arital relationships took many forms in the Victorian period, and in companionate marriages particularly those in which wife and husband worked together in the family business of cultural production (literature or art), a married woman was constituted an active agent in a partnership that for men and women united kinship capital, paid productive labour and home life (Cherry 1993: 33).

Elsie Holloway (1882-1971) became interested in photography through her father, an enthusiastic amateur. After his death in 1906, Elsie and her brother Bert published a book of their father's photographs entitled *Through Newfoundland with a Camera*. In 1908, the siblings opened the Holloway Studio, a business that soon developed a reputation for its portraits of children. Elsie continued the business after Bert's death in the First World War (Jones 1983: 27).

It is notable that in addition to Mrs. Fletcher, whose advertisement in 1841 is mentioned earlier, Greenhill, in his examination of nineteenth-century photography, mentions only two other women photographers and positions both in context with their spouses. The first reference is to a Mrs. Miller who operated a photographic studio with her partner in St. Catherines c. 1865, producing popular *cartes de visite* images in vogue in the mid-nineteenth century (Greenhill 1979: 32). The second is “Mr. and Mrs. Maynard, the best known nineteenth-century photographers in British Columbia” (56). Hannah Maynard is the subject of her spouse's photograph discussed earlier (Fig. 6.3). The marital partnership was for Victorian women an easier transition into the business world than attempting to run an independent business. The price, however, was that the woman's contribution was often marginalized by their spouses.

Hannah Maynard, however, was the exception, becoming in her own right one of the most prominent Canadian professional photographers of the period. She is a subject of considerable interest because of her eccentric photographic montages and her multiple
exposure self-portraits. Maynard’s unique professional style can be better understood by considering the “little gem” greeting cards that she sent to mothers of all the children whose portraits she had made over a previous year. A particularly striking example is the Gem Fountain (Fig. 6.7) dated 1880, although it was likely made some ten years later (Woods 1980: 24). This photographic collage features some 60 babies floating on hand-painted clouds against a black background above a “fountain of youth” centerpiece. The text at the bottom of the card reads “Sprays from the Gem Fountain” with lettering remarkably having been composed from the faces of over 5,000 children. A detail of the fountain of youth centerpiece features a number of small boys who pour water and more floating babies into a reflecting pool below (Fig. 6.8). The little boys photo sculptures that Maynard created by dusting children with rice flour and then posing them like small classical sculptures. The fountain itself is constructed from lilies that are visual references to Maynard’s own daughter Lilly, who had died in childhood (24). The entire effect of the cards is rather grim, particularly if one considers the rate of infant mortality at the time. Yet while dark, they are also fascinating, as the viewer is pulled in to examine the thousands of tiny faces.

Maynard’s self portraits are no less remarkable, often emphasizing a playful technique of multiple exposure. The example presented in Figure 1.10 shows three “Hannahs,” as a visual pun depicting “me, myself and I.” The first “Hannah” is a conservative Victorian lady pouring tea in the approved manner. The second looks straight into the lens, her gaze directly meeting that of the spectator. And in third version, “Hannah” a trickster, who pours tea down on the second Hannah’s head.

Occasionally, women established themselves independently as professional photographers, although this was rare because a fundamental requirement was having a sufficient, independent income. One example is Rosetta E. Carr (active 1883-1897), a professional photographer who by herself successfully operated The American Art Gallery in Winnipeg from 1883-1897. Set up with $4,000 capital, her studio, specializing in portraits of children, soon became the largest photographic business in the city. By 1886, her estimated annual income was between $10,000 and $15,000 (Jones 1983: 12). The significance of her photographic practice was confirmed when Carr’s work was cited as
an example of the progress of the city’s “civilization” by the local newspaper, Town Talk, in 1890.28

Even more rarely, a woman could work her way up from photographic assistant to photographer with a studio of her own. Gladys Reeves (1890-1974) was one of the few who established herself in this manner. Hired first as a receptionist with a salary of $15 a month and later as a photographic apprentice, Reeves worked for photographer Ernest Brown in Edmonton for 15 years before she opened her own studio, The Art League, in 1920 (Jones 1983: 21). Reeves stated in an interview in 1966:

I started my own studio in 1920. I had the unfortunate position of being a woman. And in those days a woman in business was not recognized. I think I was the first woman west of Portage La Prairie to start a photographic studio of my own. And there were many, many times when I'd think I'd come to the end of my tether and just couldn't go on and then I'd be afraid they'd say 'I told you so.' And I'd start in again (20).

More usually women interested in photography were employed as support staff: receptionists; secretaries; dressing room attendants; darkroom assistants helping to retouch, handcolour and frame photographs. William Notman and his sons operated their Montreal studio for almost 75 years and employed over 400 workers of which a substantial number were women, as was revealed by research conducted on the studio wage books by photo-historian Stanley Triggs.29 An example of one such employee is Miss Bell (Figure 6.1). When these records began in 1864, only one woman employee, a Mrs. Burns, was recorded. As Triggs notes, however, this quickly increased:

The wage book did not identify individuals by occupation, but Triggs states that their positions were always secondary and that the actual photographers in the Notman Studios were always male (115).

Like Notman, women photographers running their own businesses also hired other women as assistants. Rossetta Carr employed two women on the staff of her Winnipeg studio (1883-1897), Miss E. W. Ingo and Miss R. S. Miller. Elsie Holloway also employed two women, Mabel Pittman and Mary England (Jones 1983: 13). Thus both male and women photographers recognized that there were definite advantages to be gained by hiring women in certain roles.

A favoured job for a woman was as a receptionist, as this position was considered to require the recognized womanly virtues of charm, hospitality and cleanliness (Gover


29 William Notman was considered one of Canada’s most significant early photographers. For details on the Notman Studios in Canada and the United States, see Ann Thomas (1979), Triggs, (1985) and Hall et al (1993).
Women receptionists were considered integral to a successful photographic business. It was their job to smooth the way for the photographer by creating a home-like atmosphere for clients:

She could with a few subtle touches so metamorphose the gallery that it wouldn't be recognized.... She will coo to the baby while enlarging truthfully to the proud mother on its perfections (28).
Women were also often employed to handcolour photographs in watercolour, oil or Indian ink. An example is Mrs. W.K. Sargent's advertisement billing herself as an experienced and accurate colourist of photographs in an advertisement in *The Globe* in 1858 (Koltun cited in Pedersen and Phemister 1990: 108).

Little is known about the conditions under which these women support staff worked, although generally they seem to have been assigned minor or hazardous jobs such as working in the darkroom and exposure to photographic chemicals many of which we now know to pose serious health concerns. In extreme cases, such conditions proved to be fatal. In 1897, Elizabeth Archibald, a studio assistant for ten years in William Topley's studio in Ottawa, died at age 31 with her family suspecting the cause of death to be prolonged exposure to photographic chemicals in poorly ventilated darkrooms (109).

Similarly, in large factory businesses such as Kodak, much of the preparation of photographic materials, retouching of negatives, finishing and mounting of photographs was done by women workers (Pedersen and Phemister 1990: 108). Despite the fact that women were employed in the photographic industry, there was little "revision of the widely held ideas about women's scientific ineptitude and inability to cope with complex technology" (109). This reinforced the societal expectation that woman be the helpmate rather than the instigator of activities like photography. And yet, despite this attitude, for women in Canada at the end of the nineteenth century, photography was a socially sanctioned activity, one they were free to indulge, provided that in so doing they not contravene the constraints imposed on them by Victorian society. It should not be surprising then, that photographs of the time made by women are primarily images of family and friends made for the family photo album. In keeping with this prevailing attitude too, for those women seeking to work professionally in the field, employment was generally to be found only in supporting roles, such as darkroom assistants or photo-retouchers.

For the few who were able to reach beyond the bounds of societal expectation, photography became a source of empowerment. By the beginnings of the twentieth century, women were increasingly using the camera as a form of self-expression, developing an identifiable, feminine voice. Photography, in the words of Gover, "gave a woman room to find her own identity while remaining close to the hearth" (1988: 32). Geraldine Moodie, for example, owned and operated several professional studios while raising six children. The work of the women photographers selected has been specifically cited in the chapters of this study as examples of these new readings of photography as a gendered social practice.