

Stanley Triggs, *William Notman: Stamp of a Studio*. Toronto, Coach House Press, 1985, 173 pp., illus., \$42.00 (cloth)

Jeffrey Nolte

Volume 15, Number 1, 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073436ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073436ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Nolte, J. (1988). Review of [Stanley Triggs, *William Notman: Stamp of a Studio*. Toronto, Coach House Press, 1985, 173 pp., illus., \$42.00 (cloth)]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 15(1), 71–72.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1073436ar>

LIVRES / BOOKS

STANLEY TRIGGS *William Notman: Stamp of a Studio*. Toronto, Coach House Press, 1985, 173 pp., illus., \$42.00 (cloth).

The newest monograph on the work of Notman and Studio is in fact a collaboration between the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and the McCord Museum designed primarily to accompany the exhibition that began at the AGO and is still in circulation. It is the first book on the work of Notman (and a few of his more prominent photographers) since *Notman*, which was published in 1967 by McGill University Press.

It would be unfortunate to make any comparisons of this recent effort with the earlier volume. The 1967 collection is considerably more extensive and its range of visual imagery is far greater. The quality of those earlier reproductions is incomparable. Nonetheless, the monograph is intended principally as an exhibition catalogue and it is very well suited to this task. The images are reproduced on a coated paper stock in duotone and they do look good.

Stanley Triggs, curator of the Notman Collection at the McCord Museum, has written a scholarly and authoritative text that stands out in its own right. His research efforts are quite extensive and offer the reader fresh insight into Notman. He provides us with details of the photographer's hasty departure from Scotland under somewhat unsavory conditions, his arrival in Canada, the establishment of his first photographic studio, and his subsequent successes.

Triggs devotes several chapters to the works and biographies of a number of the talented individuals who went virtually unmentioned in the 1967 publication although their works figure prominently in that volume. Before this time, very little was known about these individuals. Coach House Press has published several books of photographs that contain the works of Notman and Company. There is *Benjamin Baltzly*, a volume on the work of one of Notman's more significant photographers; *Canadian Photography 1839-1920* provides reproductions of the work of several others along with brief biographical notes.

Of Notman's own work, by far the strongest images are the portraits. The boldness of these images may be attributable, in part, to the ritual of preparation for the sittings and the formality of the experience. Triggs writes of "imbuing his subjects with the aura of greatness . . . endowing them with mystic proportions" (p. 29).

Included in this collection are some fine landscape images. In one image, Lorette Falls, he isolates a bridge and a man-made waterfall into the upper right corner of the frame with delicately curving lines of white water falling naturally over dark rocks into the foreground.

The interest in these landscapes is more historic than it is visual. His stereo views, which leap so well into the

third dimension, have more popular appeal, yet from an aesthetic perspective, they are somehow lacking. His studio set-ups and composites, which may have been quite popular at the time, now appear as quaint contrivances. (An entire chapter has been devoted to the people in Notman's art department who created the composites in addition to their other duties such as retouching and hand-colouring photographs and painting the incredible range of backgrounds for studio portraits.)

The work of William McFarlane Notman, the son, consists almost entirely of pictures capturing the newness of Canada—landscapes, wilderness images, western towns in their infancy. Because the images are, for the most part, contact prints with infinite detail, they reveal the landscape in minutiae with the most delicate definition. The reproductions of several of these pictures fail to capture the high quality of his landscape work because they lack the fine printing and precision of detail. Instead they appear muddy and flat. In Coach House's earlier *Canadian Photography 1839-1920*, the one landscape chosen for reproduction is printed with a masterful range of tones and stunning detail.

The images of cities range from detail views of streets, stores, houses, and walks to larger views of cities within the landscape. Medicine Hat was captured in 1884 with a pair of images that offer a wonderful panorama. In the right picture, we see a small settlement receding from a bridge that crosses a river into the foreground; in the left frame, simply a sweeping curve in a river, with signs of civilization ending abruptly between the frames.

Two of Notman's more prominent photographers travelled to opposite ends of Canada to record the look of the country and its development. Benjamin Baltzly went west and produced a body of work that captured the sense of raw wilderness: his is very powerful imagery. Given the actual period in which he undertook these excursions, there is every reason to believe that his life was in danger on more than one occasion. The stark harshness of the images only begins to intimate the physical strenuousness and great mental demand of the project. He travelled on horseback, by canoe, and on foot, with heavy camera equipment including glass negative plates, pursuing places and images that were hitherto unseen by civilization. Yet in the midst of one expedition, his diary points out, he took Sundays off to find a "reverential spot" so that, at the same hour as his wife and child back in Montreal, he might share a time of worship with them.

The well-researched work of William Haggerty is represented for the first time in this volume. He worked primarily in the eastern provinces, capturing the more civilized tranquillity and sense of orderly development. His images are composed with apparent ease. His landscapes contain fenced fields, streams, lakes, and harbours full of anglers, sailboats, and lighthouses. Several

photographs do contain a wilderness, but of a different kind. It is more gentle and picturesque, with images leaving the viewer breathless, transported to some idyllic spot. It is a wilderness from which one could return home for dinner.

Finally, one of the last chapters is devoted to that largest group of Notman staff, those photographers who will, for lack of any sortable records or documentation, remain anonymous. As might be expected, some of the most visually interesting photographs, and indeed the widest range of imagery, issues from this group. Logically, the further the images get from "the spectacular" (where we would expect to find appropriate documentation), the greater the risk that the names of the subjects and photographers are lost.

Perhaps William Notman's greatest strength was not his photographic contribution but rather his business acumen, to which Triggs makes several references. Notman's photographic empire, which at its height virtually covered Canada and spread into the United States, stands as a mammoth achievement.

The Notman Studio afforded his many photographers a wonderful opportunity in their day. Because of his efforts, photography, then in its relative infancy, provided a vast array of new images of distant, exotic, and as yet unseen places that enjoyed an almost instant popular demand. As well, his own portraits of notable personages and the quaint pictorial images of people in everyday activities are equally interesting.

Without Notman and Company, much of Canada's history might have gone unrecorded. Without Notman, we would lack many of the singularly spectacular events as well as the everyday scenes. A great portion of Canada's visual history is the product of Notman and his staff: we know people, places, and events because of their photographs. Their pictures range from heads of state to ordinary citizens, from landscapes in distant places to train-car interiors. Not much escaped their cameras.

It was a pleasure to have the opportunity to see the range of work done by Notman and his many associates, especially in the context of this newest and masterfully comprehensive effort.

JEFFREY NOLTE
116 Billings Avenue
Toronto, Ontario M4L 2S2

DAVID M. WILSON *The Bayeux Tapestry*. London, Thames and Hudson Ltd.; New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1985, 234 pp., 75 colour plates, 19 black and white figures, 22 black and white illus., \$100.00 (cloth).

In his preface, David Wilson writes that the glory of this book lies in the pictures, for its main purpose was to publish new, complete, and accurate colour reproduction of the Bayeux Tapestry. The opportunity arose during the winter of 1982-83 when the Tapestry was moved from the former Bishop's Palace opposite Bayeux Cathedral, where it had reposed since 1948, and placed in a new installation, the Centre Guillaume-le-Conquérant. While the embroidery was on the examin-

ing table, the backing was detached and it was photographed on both sides by Clichés Villes de Bayeux and the Sous-Direction des Monuments Historiques. The photographs of the presentation form the visual heart of this book.

The entire hanging is reproduced gloriously in colour, at slightly more than half-size. The original is about 70 metres long by about 50 centimetres high, which accounts for the 73 double-page and two single-page illustrations. The plates are sewn in small gatherings so as to open out flat and no part of the illustration is lost in the binding. Colour shift is minimal as the photographs were taken by natural light. The clarity of the printing not only reveals the slightly three-dimensional surface of the hanging produced by the laid and couched work in wool sitting atop the linen ground fabric, but also mercilessly exposes the tears, holes, repairs, and "restorations" of the stitching. It is now possible to compare the current state of the Tapestry with its earliest reproductions to ascertain the extent of the reconstructed sections. These illustrations allow scholars the opportunity to scrutinize details of the Tapestry at leisure, in a manner not possible while looking at the original.

The one great drawback to the reproduction is inevitable. The awkward size of the embroidery precludes an overview, with the result that even the two-page spread of the plates, each of which covers about 48 inches of the Tapestry, breaks the embroidery into arbitrary sections, destroying all perception of stylistic, scenic, or narrative continuity. In this remarkable work, representing the first time a fully developed and flowing narrative is rendered in visual form in an extant work of art, this is a major contradiction of the original. One of the unfortunate victims is the scene of Harold's oath at Bayeux (Plates 23 and 24), a scene that many scholars (*pace* Wilson) see as pivotal in the narrative. Here, the two main figures, William of Normandy and Harold of Wessex, appear completely disconnected, on separate folds. But while the scenic divisions of the Tapestry had to be ignored in the printing of the reproduction, certain tableaux have been admirably framed. Harold's audience with King Edward upon the former's return from Normandy (Plate 28) remains intact, and Harold's coronation as king of England (Plate 31) survives.

The problem of visual and narrative fragmentation is compensated for, as much as possible, by the reprinting of the smaller facsimile used in earlier Phaidon publications (Stenton 1957 and Gibbs-Smith 1973). But the truth remains that the only way really to appreciate the visual and narrative flow that is central to the Bayeux Tapestry's artistic uniqueness and success is to make the pilgrimage to Bayeux to see it "in the flesh."

The text accompanying the reproduction is aimed at both the scholar and the educated general reader. It is for the most part successful and informative, though perhaps not a major contribution to original scholarship. The book begins with a foreword by Jean Le Carpentier, the mayor of Bayeux and thus the officially designated guardian of the Bayeux Tapestry. After a short preface, the *Introduction: A Work of Art and an Historical Document* includes a description of the embroidery, a very abbreviated history of the hanging, a historical background to the narrative that identifies the principal actors, and an evaluation of the Tapestry as a historical source for the events it portrays.