

John O'Brian, *The Bomb in the Wilderness: Photography and the Nuclear Era in Canada*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020, 244 pp., 124 photos, 20 in colour, \$32.95 (paperback) ISBN 9780774863889

Claudette Lauzon, John O'Brian, eds., *Through Post-Atomic Eyes*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2020, 496 pp., 158 colour photos, 3 maps, \$49.95 (cloth) ISBN 9780228001393

Siobhan Angus

Volume 46, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078070ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078070ar>

[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

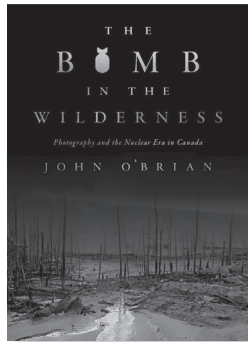
Angus, S. (2021). Review of [John O'Brian, *The Bomb in the Wilderness: Photography and the Nuclear Era in Canada*, Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020, 244 pp., 124 photos, 20 in colour, \$32.95 (paperback) ISBN 9780774863889 / Claudette Lauzon, John O'Brian, eds., *Through Post-Atomic Eyes*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2020, 496 pp., 158 colour photos, 3 maps, \$49.95 (cloth) ISBN 9780228001393]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 46(1), 105–107. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078070ar>

Reviews Recensions

John O'Brian
***The Bomb in the Wilderness:
Photography and the Nuclear Era
in Canada***

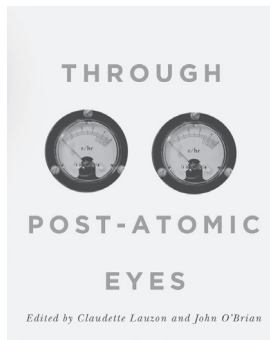
Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020

244 pp. 124 photos, 20 in colour
\$32.95 (paperback) ISBN 9780774863889



Claudette Lauzon, John O'Brian, eds.
Through Post-Atomic Eyes
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-
Queens University Press, 2020

496 pp. 158 colour photos, 3 maps
\$49.95 (cloth) ISBN 9780228001393



Siobhan Angus

On Valentine's Day, 1950, a US Air Force B-36 bomber en route to Alaska carrying a Mark IV bomb experienced engine failure while flying over British Columbia. The bomb, similar to the one dropped on Nagasaki (though without its plutonium core), detonated in mid-air above the Queen Charlotte Islands. It was the world's first "Broken Arrow" incident—the loss or explosion of a nuclear weapon that doesn't result in war. With 5,300 pounds of

conventional explosives and eighty-eight pounds of natural uranium casing, the explosion led to radioactive fallout across the region. Five of the seventeen crew members were killed. The wreckage of the aircraft was not recovered until 1953 and the fact that it carried an atomic bomb was not made public until 1977. Unlike most atomic bombings, this unnamed incident was not photographed and thus did not enter into the realm of visibility.

Without a visual record, it became a "footnote in nuclear history."

This story appears on page 151 of *The Bomb in the Wilderness* by John O'Brian, and it aptly exemplifies his interest in the constitutive role that photography plays in constructing the public memory of atomic culture. Using Canada as a case study, the monograph develops a striking insight first advanced in O'Brian's *Camera Atomica* (2015): that atomic culture is inextricably linked to the visual. While *Camera Atomica* explored a wide array of disaster images, *The Bomb in the Wilderness* focuses on Canada's place in atomic history. Atomic culture plays out on the level of the spectacular, both visual (the explosive imagery of the mushroom cloud) and narrative (the struggle between superpowers). *The Bomb in the Wilderness* brings a lesser-known nuclear history into view. In doing so, it challenges the perception of Canada as a peripheral to nuclear history.

Canada's atomic history is about resources and processing and, as O'Brian points out, Canada was in fact the largest supplier of uranium to the United States military at the time of the Broken Arrow incident over British Columbia (151). The historian Gabrielle Hecht argues that the fetishization of the power of the bomb directs attention to bombs and reactors, which makes sites where the nuclear emerges, like mines and laboratories, relatively invisible.¹ O'Brian traces these links in order to restore such sites to atomic history. In the Broken Arrow incident, for example, some of the uranium in the bomb was likely extracted at Port Radium, which supplied uranium to the Manhattan Project for the first atomic bomb, and where the Sahtu Dene people who transported the ore were exposed to high levels of radiation poisoning. The uranium could have been processed in Port Hope at the oldest uranium factory in the world. Canada's coastlines were used in submarine and nuclear missile

testing. These are just a few of the ways that Canada contributed to the emergence of the nuclear era and the Cold War.

Meticulous and wide-ranging, O'Brian's often surprising readings of images both familiar and strange provide a compelling base for his study of nuclear risk. Rather than debate what photography can or cannot show us about nuclear risk, O'Brian traces the numerous ways that photography has intersected with the atomic. By situating photography as an agent of history, O'Brian concludes that "photography, history, memory, and violence are part of the same continuum. They cannot be pulled apart" (9). This approach productively engages with theorizations of photography's role in documenting violence while creating space for the contradictions of the nuclear to coexist. In the same way that radiation is both a poison and a cure, photographs, by "some strange calculus" both "alert viewers to nuclear threat [and] numb them to its dangers" (xiii).

This thesis is amply proven by the wealth of illustrations in the volume. In addition to its analytical insights, *The Bomb in the Wilderness* is a remarkable archive of Canadian atomic photography. The often-mundane images of Port Hope, where uranium was refined, and of the nuclear research facilities in the Chalk River complex, are good examples. O'Brian shows how these images reflect an attempt to "domesticate" the bomb. Their normalcy makes the other images particularly jarring. The eye skims over the deceptively prosaic photos until a closer look reveals a destabilizing uncanniness through images of such things as radioactive grasshoppers. Other photographs bring haunting moments into view, such as a US Army Photographic Signal Corps shot of the 1957 Plumbbob nuclear tests in Nevada, where eighteen thousand US and Canadian soldiers

were ordered to advance towards the mushroom cloud without protective gear. O'Brian's reading of these images has methodological insights for art historians considering the role of photography in, among other things, the climate crisis. O'Brian's inclusion of instrumental and artistic photography productively brings images into dialogue across genres.

Claudette Lauzon and John O'Brian's provocative edited collection *Through Post-Atomic Eyes* considers the ongoing significance of nuclear issues. This volume of thirteen essays and fourteen artist portfolios (reproduced in colour) emerges from a 2015 symposium with the same title hosted by OCAD University and the University of Toronto in conjunction with O'Brian's exhibition *Camera Atomica* at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Lauzon and O'Brian contend that understanding shifting responses to atomic risk can also offer relevant lessons for global warming, the rise of fascism, the disinformation crisis, and the surveillance state—crises which connect directly to the nuclear project. The essays model a willingness to cross disciplinary boundaries, and many are written in the first person or feature experimental writing. The volume is divided into four sections: "Nuclear Afterimages," "Beyond the Bomb," "Hiroshima After Fukushima," and "Atomic Anthropocene."

The prefix *post* in the title does not mean past or beyond, but rather, following Karen Barad, a *troubling* of linearity, "to undo pervasive conceptions of temporality that take progress as inevitable and the past as something that has passed" (306). It also highlights how the blinding light of the atomic bomb transformed vision. Like the radioactive decay of the by-products of the atomic age, the nuclear continues to shape the present and future in material ways.

The first section, "Nuclear Afterimages," establishes how photography was shaped by nuclear culture

and how this co-evolution continues to play a role in shaping public perception. Anthropologist Joseph Masco theorizes that a "collective blindness,"—at once material, optical, and cultural—resulted from the first atomic detonation. He demonstrates how the blast was "simultaneously embodied and photochemical" (87) while documenting the myriad ways that camera technology is linked to military innovation. Geographer Matthew Farish redirects attention "below the bomb" to the landscapes of nuclear colonialism to consider the geographies of nuclear testing. In "Beyond the Bomb," the essays turn to military technocultures, with themes ranging from the geographies of Cold War weapons testing to big data, surveillance, and drone warfare.

"Hiroshima after Fukushima" riffs on Rosalyn Deutsche's *Hiroshima After Iraq* (Columbia University Press, 2011) to consider how the atrocities at Hiroshima and Nagasaki continue into the present. The essays take up the prompt to trouble time to investigate how artists have explored the consequences of nuclear disaster. The volume concludes with "Atomic Anthropocene" to consider what Rob Nixon calls the slow violence of environmental damage.² Art historian Karla McManus's analysis of David McMillan's photographs from the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone reflects on the difficulty of picturing both nuclear events and climate change, as photography can only "infer and hint at the insidious and imperceptible" changes in eco-systems (287). Through McMillan's practice of photographing the same places, however, the subtle rewilding of the landscape comes into view, and this can "offer the viewer a chance to actively imagine the future through the viewing of past, in the present" (300).

The collection concludes with Karen Barad's feminist new-materialist rereading of quantum theory and atomic time (earlier published in *new formations*). Full of startling

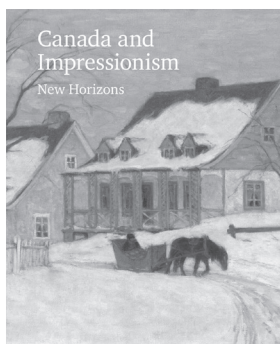
insight, Barad approaches 1492 as “living inside” 1945, linking the settler-colonial control of territory, the Trinity bombing in New Mexico, Nagasaki, and the murder of matter itself within an ongoing continuum of displacement and destruction. This compelling reworking of temporality invites us to unsettle the future by recognizing “the infinite depths of our inhumanity and the infinite possibilities for living and dying otherwise” (329).

The artist projects (sixteen in total) are dispersed between the essays, serving as connective tissue that links and expands the disparate themes explored in the essays. Photography is featured prominently, and, interestingly, there are no paintings included, perhaps reflecting Willem de Kooning’s suggestion that “the light of the atom bomb will change the concept of painting once and for all.”³ Formally, the works range from Mark Ruwedel’s stark documentary photographs of the Diefenbunker, Edward Burtynsky’s toxic sublime, Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge’s photographic tableau of the home of a nuclear plant worker, Kristan Horton’s comic book style drawings, and Public Studio’s geodesic dome at Nuit Blanche 2015. A number of the projects function to bear witness (Katy McCormick’s photographs of “A-bombed trees”) or to collect evidence (Susan Schuppli). The heterogeneous portfolios showcase the multiple ways artists have engaged with the atomic.

An emphasis on settler colonialism runs throughout the book, an important corrective to many earlier histories which obscured the impact of extraction on Indigenous communities. However, given the global history of uranium extraction and refining within atomic culture, a broader geographic scope—say, for example, Shinkolobwe in the Democratic Republic of Congo which supplied uranium for the Manhattan Project under Belgian Colonial rule—would augment the focus on the Americas. However, by

showing the significant role that visual culture played in atomic culture while contributing rich new case studies, both volumes are a significant contribution to the global energy humanities.

With an interdisciplinary focus and with constant attention to environmental themes, *The Bomb in the Wilderness* and *Through Post-Atomic Eyes* bring art history into dialogue with the emerging field of the energy humanities. Both volumes explore the multifaceted role of art in atomic culture to nuance the suspicion that art might only function to aestheticize or anesthetize, revealing how close attention to the visual yields new insights into nuclear culture. While an awareness of nuclear risk defined the second half of the twentieth century, it seemed that global warming had replaced nuclear war as the main existential threat in the



twenty-first century. Accordingly, recent scholarship in the energy humanities has largely focused on petrocultures, which is a necessary correction to the relative cultural invisibility of oil in the twentieth century. However, as Lauzon and O’Brian note in the introduction of *Through Post-Atomic Eyes*, nuclear risk is an ongoing political and environmental problem. The Doomsday Clock, managed by the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, is the closest it has ever been to midnight due to the combined threats of nuclear war, global warming, and disruptive

technologies. As of January 2021, it is only one hundred seconds to midnight. These books broaden the scope through which we assess the nuclear and its aftershocks and show how photography has “haunted the nuclear imagination by disclosing what has been masked” (*The Bomb in The Wilderness*, xix). ¶

Siobhan Angus is currently a Banting Postdoctoral Fellow in the History of Art at Yale University and a visiting scholar at the Yale Center for British Art. She holds a PhD in Art History and Visual Culture from York University. —siobhan.angus@yale.edu

1. Gabrielle Hecht, “Nuclearity,” in *The Nuclear Culture Source Book*, ed. Elle Carpenter (London: Black Dog Publishing 2016), 127.
2. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
3. Willem de Kooning, “What Abstract Art Means to Me,” first published in “What Abstract Art Means to Me: Statements by Six American Artists,” *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin* xviii, no. 3 (Spring 1951): 4.

Rosemary Shipton, ed.
**Canada and Impressionism:
New Horizons**

Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada;
Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers,
2019

296 pp. 290 colour illus., 20 b&w
\$ 40.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9783897905474

Alena Buis

This publication accompanied the first major travelling show of Canadian Impressionism in Europe, which opened at the Kunsthalle München in Germany and went on to the Fondation de l’Hermitage in Lausanne, Switzerland and the Musée Fabre in Montpellier, France before returning to the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in early 2021. Translated into French and German, the publication serves as both exhibition catalogue and stand-alone book.

At first glance, *Canada and Impressionism* has all the trappings of a slick