

## The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada

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# Book Review

## Compte rendu de livre

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Review of

Payne, Carol and Andrea Kunard eds. 2011. *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada*. Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Pp. xx + 276. Colour photographs, black and white photographs, bibliography, index, hardcover, ISBN 978-0-7735-3861-0, \$49.95.

Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard's anthology *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* adds a new layer of understanding on the one hand, and complexity on the other, to the important role of photography in Canada. In addition to one historiographical essay, fourteen essays address, among other themes, Aboriginal photography, geographical imagery, identity in a settler environment, images and memory, the ambiguity of the photograph, the colonial encounter, the commodification of the image and the symbolism of landscape. Using images that span the late 19th to the early 21st century, this book explores how photography has functioned as a tool through which various cultures, events and ideologies have been visualized or empowered. Ultimately, the essays contained within this anthology combine to uncover photography's continuous record of cultural importance in Canada.

The purpose of this anthology is clear; that being the role photography played in the development of Canada's cultural identity. Payne and Kunard show photography to have relevance beyond its documentary purposes. By presenting essays that deconstruct photographic images, they reveal the photograph's contribution to the processes of cultural identity-building and to understanding the past. In their introduction, Payne and Kunard assert that photography has "actively engaged in the formation of cultural identity" and they believe that the cultural work of photography is "derived from an appreciation for the interweaving of histories, historical approaches, and methodologies" (xiv). The essays included in this collection speak to their perspective.

In order to showcase the different functions of photography, the editors have arranged the essays into four distinct sections, each addressing a specific way in which photography has been used for cultural purposes. One link between these sections, however, is a focus on Aboriginal culture within Canada, an area that is not often deconstructed within Canadian photographic history. Separating many of the approaches taken by these contributors from those of other Aboriginal studies is their focus on the multiple histories contained within the photograph itself, in addition to the act of picture taking. In other words, although analyzing historical photos taken of and by indigenous populations is a well explored field, several of the works contained in this compilation, especially the essays by Sherry Farrell Racette and Lynne Bell, show how exploring the cultural context of photographs can yield alternative and more complete histories. Consequently, this collection is particularly valuable for researchers of Aboriginal and image histories in Canada. It is also quite relevant for historians of material culture because many of the included essays present photographs as personal and cultural artifacts. By using the personal, social and political context for photographs within their analytical framework, contributors such as James Opp and Sarah Bassnett reveal the complex intersection between cultural ideologies and the multiple functions of a photograph.

Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard's previous works have confronted representations of identities through photography and how this medium discloses alternative social realities. *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* is an extension of

their earlier work using photographic history to access cultural, national, ethnic and material histories. The contributors lend their expertise to this process: art historians, curators, artists and Canadian studies historians add credence to the editors' claim that photography has several important cultural functions within Canada that must be accessed through various critical approaches.

The quality of the images used within the book heightens its usefulness; the editors and contributors have carefully selected and arranged a large number of key black and white photographs—as well as colour images—that have been reproduced with the integrity of the image in mind. Not only do the included images support the thesis of each individual essay, but when regarded as part of the whole, they display the diverse ways in which photography has been used and appropriated within a Canadian context. More importantly, perhaps, these images point to the diversity of Canadian photography, solidifying its place as an important historical consideration.

This anthology should not be mistaken for an overview of the history of Canadian photographers or how Canadian culture is represented through images; it neither claims nor aims to prove that there is a distinctly Canadian photograph. Although the essays combine to show that photography has been used as a tool for nation-building and the creation of local and national identities, they all challenge the essential assumption that photography in Canada is somehow isolated from international trends. Global connections, even while exhibited within Canada, are important to Canadians' senses of identity, as shown in the essays by John O'Brian and Blake Fitzpatrick. Essays that address the Canadian reception of international photographs lend further support to Payne and Kunard's rejection of "any claims to a definitive, singular telling of photography's history" (xiv). Using photography for cultural or anthropological explorations is an approach that had been employed on a global scale in the past, but looking at this within a Canadian context is novel and useful.

The editors also provide a valuable historiography essay as their fifteenth and concluding chapter. This essay not only contextualizes the preceding chapters, but more importantly, acts as a means through which to facilitate further research on photography's work in Canada. However, it is in this essay that their definition of what constitutes culturally relevant photography for Canada's history becomes clear, as they emphasize

studies on 19th-century techniques or modern professional photographers. Here, they exclude important studies on amateur photographers, which could arguably provide another aspect to photography's cultural work. This approach is used throughout the anthology, and by prioritizing the production and consumption of professional and ethnic photography in Canada, the editors appear to suggest a limited definition of who can contribute to photography's cultural work. Payne and Kunard's assertion that the social context of the photographer and the purposes of their photographs must be taken into account is not only valid but essential to any understanding of photography's function. However, this reviewer would like to have seen some discussion of how technological limitations have shaped understandings of the act of photographing, as well as more detailed discussion on who contributes to the creation of culture through photography, why and in which ways.

Nonetheless, this anthology represents the beginning of an important discussion. The varied and extensive backgrounds of the contributors, and the inclusion of a relatively strong historiography essay signal a move toward a multidisciplinary understanding of photography, simultaneously indicating a need for further assessments of photography that strives to complicate seemingly simple narratives. *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* covers significant ground in both its ambition and scope. By exploring the use of photography to create understandings of culture and the past, the editors and contributors have begun an important dialogue—how historians can use photographs, the influence of photographs on the identities of individuals and groups and the multiple meanings of an image. This work is indispensable for future studies on photography within Canada.