WILLIAM NOTMAN’S *Young Canada* is a visual metaphor for the foundational myths of the nascent Canadian nation. Posed against a painted backdrop in Notman’s Montreal studio, his son, William McFarlane Notman, sits in a snowy landscape, hood pulled tight, snowshoes at the ready. The glass negative waved through a mist of white paint produced the raging blizzard. *Young Canada* can easily be dismissed as kitsch, but this use of photography is more evocation than record. It represents an opportunity to explore the ways in which photographs have expressed and mediated engagement with the physical world, and thereby helped to forge and perpetuate ideas about environment and environmental concerns.

In Canada, photography has played an active role in the processes by which people have come to picture landscape, invest it with meaning, and articulate their relationship to it for more than 150 years. The photographs in this gallery have been selected to show how Canadian nature was imagined in early photography, and how it has been reimagined of late. They do not constitute a historical overview nor are they intended to highlight environmental change. Such a survey would have included images of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s on the Saskatchewan prairie, the Winnipeg floods of 1950 and 1997, and the Illecillewaet Glacier, a “must-see” tourist destination photographed repeatedly since the nineteenth-century. Chosen with the intention of drawing out methodological approaches rather than tracing chronological developments, these mid-nineteenth- and late-twentieth-century images allow us to probe beyond their visual content.
to see what was brought to their creation, circulation, viewing, preservation, and use. Considered individually, comparatively, and collectively, they highlight aesthetic concerns and photographic fictions, changing perceptions, and contemporary politics.
This series of close readings explores how ideas central to Canadian environmental history have been reflected in, and communicated by, photographs. It goes beyond their presentation of historical facts or celebration of wilderness aesthetics to suggest how photographs have participated in the processes by which the human encounter with the physical world has been shaped and reshaped. If the difference between environment and landscape rests on sets of shared meanings embedded in and expressed through social practices, then it is well worth asking how photographs—either as images that generate shared meanings, or as both records and products of social practices—have helped to constitute or contest the social meaning(s) of water, rocks, and animals, snow and ice, trees, forest, and prairie.

*THE PRAIRIE, on the Banks of Red River, Looking South* is a monument to treelessness. Taken by surveyor and photographer Humphrey Lloyd Hime near what is now Winnipeg, Manitoba, this austere image of prairie topography reduces the landscape to what Canadian novelist W. O. Mitchell has called “the least common denominator of nature”: earth and sky.1 To our eyes, it is an unrelentingly stark image, but to view it as desolate would be a misreading. Rather, its meaning, as well as the cultural value and projected use of the land it portrayed, was intimately linked to historically situated assumptions about land and land use brought to the act of looking.

Treelessness, long considered a marker of aridity or sterility, had mitigated against settlement and favored the Hudson’s Bay Company monopoly in Rupert’s Land. But *The Prairie, ... Looking South* was created at a time when beliefs about treelessness as an indicator of agricultural potential were under review. Lorin Blodget’s *Climatology of the United States and of the Temperate Latitudes of the North American Continent*, published in Philadelphia in 1857, challenged the accepted wisdom about latitude determining climate, removed climate as a barrier to settlement, and paved the way for a reappraisal of expectations for territorial expansion into the Great North-West.2 With the relationship between arability and treelessness recast, the vast ocean of prairie photographed by Hime was no longer viewed as an extension of the Great American Desert but rather as part of a “fertile belt” receptive to settlement, agriculture, and westward expansion. Such a scientific vision was promoted by economic and political interests in central Canada, though not necessarily shared by those using or living on the land at the time: the First Nations, Métis, Hudson’s Bay Company officials, Catholic missionaries, and American traders.
When contemplated in historical perspective—against nineteenth-century American expansionism and Manifest Destiny, the need for east-west lines of communication between British territories at Red River and on the Pacific Ocean, the imminent expiration of the Hudson’s Bay Company lease on Rupert’s Land, and the prevailing fascination with the horizon as a metaphorical frontier separating the reality of here from the promise of there—the power of this image to stir economic hopes and fuel political dreams among Canadian expansionists and British imperialists becomes clear. Viewed in these terms, Hime’s quintessential portrait of the prairie, so bereft of content, can be seen as a geographical imagining, rich in meaning.
WILLIAM ENGLAND’S photograph of a train crossing the famous wire-hung bridge designed by the great nineteenth-century civil engineer John Augustus Roebling to span the Niagara Gorge about a mile and a half below the Falls would have commanded considerable market appeal for a society enthralled with evidence of progress. Despite a general distrust of suspension bridges in the wake of recent structural failures with tragic loss of life in both Britain and the United States, Roebling’s bridge presented a feat of engineering that symbolized the power of human ingenuity to overcome natural obstacles and thereby conquer great distances. For viewers struggling with ideas about geological time and human evolution in the wake of Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, the gorge and its geological strata held particular fascination. And in the foreground, the Maid of the Mist dock and the family suggest that this wonder of Nature, while awe-inspiring, is accessible to the genteel tourist.

At the same time that William England took this single, large-plate view, he also produced a stereoscopic view which, when seen through a special viewing device, gave the realistic illusion of three-dimensional space. The two versions of Niagara Suspension Bridge, similar in visual content, are very different physical objects that generated meaning in very different ways, and England’s effort to record the scene in both formats flags the need to consider presentational form as a significant part of the circulation and viewing of photographs. Mass produced and marketed on both sides of the Atlantic as part of the London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company’s series America in the Stereoscope, the less expensive, more popular stereoscopic version warrants scrutiny as a commercial response to anticipated market interests as well as part of the visual narrative about the New World. In addition, whereas the large print carried only a title, the card-mounted stereoview included a descriptive letterpress text on the back which framed the way in which the bridge was to be viewed: through reference to the great engineer who designed it, its considerable cost, its geographical location, its physical dimensions, its twofold utilitarian service to rail and road traffic, and the relative recency of its inaugural use. This juxtaposition of recto image and verso text is key to understanding how Niagara Suspension Bridge would have been received when it first circulated in 1860.

In his book American Technological Sublime, David Nye distinguishes between two forms of the technological sublime: the dynamic, in which space and time were conquered by the telegraph, the steamboat, and the railroad, and the static, in which obstacles and forces of Nature were conquered by bridges and skyscrapers. He also suggests that natural wonders such as Niagara Falls “became emblems of divinity comparable to the wonders of the ancient world and the greatest architectural achievements of modern times.” Thus England’s Niagara Suspension Bridge would have been well suited to the day: here, the “dynamic sublime” of the railroad, the “static sublime” of the bridge, and the natural sublime of the gorge converged. As powerful surrogates for firsthand observation, England’s images were credited at the time with bringing people into “closer and safer acquaintance with the New World than all books that have been written on the subject.”
Figures 3a, 3b, 3c. William England (1816-1896)

The Niagara Suspension Bridge, 1859. Albumen print, 236 x 280 mm image, on 463 x 589 mm mount.

The Niagara Suspension Bridge, 1859 #18 in the series, America in the Stereoscope, published by the London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company, 1860, stereoscopic albumen prints on mount, recto purple with gold lettering; verso light blue with American eagle logo.


Niagara Suspension Bridge, 1859. Albumen print, 236 x 280 mm image, on 463 x 589 mm mount.

The Niagara Suspension Bridge, 1859 #18 in the series, America in the Stereoscope, published by the London Stereoscopic and Photographic Company, 1860, stereoscopic albumen prints on mount, recto purple with gold lettering; verso light blue with American eagle logo.

PART OF AN ALBUM of photographs that won an honorable mention in the Fine Arts Section of the 1865 Dublin International Exhibition, Alexander Henderson’s *Spring Inundation* also received international exposure that year in the print exchange of England’s Amateur Photographic Association. It has survived in multiple copies and is preserved in very different cultural institutions. Categorized as a work of art, it was described as a “dreamlike fantasy ... elegant, poetic, and pensive,” in *Magicians of Light*, the National Gallery of Canada’s major exhibition and book showcasing its international fine art photography collection. Categorized as a document of history, it was a key image in *Private Realms of Light: Amateur Photography in Canada 1839-1940*, drawn from the holdings of the National Archives of Canada. Thus, *Spring Inundation* alerts us to the fact that research agendas are often circumscribed by institutional discourse, disciplinary perspectives, and media expertise. It also highlights the difference between “looking at” this photograph for the aesthetic appreciation of its formal qualities and “looking through” it for a factual record of this natural disaster. Ultimately, it demonstrates that primary sources for environmental history may lurk in unlikely places.

Henderson, having immigrated to Canada from Scotland in 1855, was one of several photographers who recorded the annual flooding of the St. Lawrence River around Montreal throughout the late nineteenth century. But *Spring Inundation* differs dramatically from his contemporaries’ journalistic documentation of boys on makeshift rafts or men in canoes posed alongside major landmarks or floating down the streets of Montreal. Appreciated then and now for its formal qualities and artistic merit, *Spring Inundation* has become an iconic image in the oeuvre of an established Canadian photographer. Yet, at the time it was taken, photography was still widely criticized as a technology dependent not on human genius and imagination, but rather on a mindless machine which created slavish copies of nature. In creating this aesthetically pleasing composition and then circulating it in fine art circles and exhibitions, it is clear that Henderson wanted to do more than document a natural disaster: he sought to produce a work of art. Viewing this serene scene now, in the hushed space of the gallery or research room, and with the comfortable detachment and cultural taste of temporal distance, it is worth considering the longstanding history of, and changing relationship between, artistic production and environmental concern.
Figure 4. Alexander Henderson (1831-1913)

Spring Inundation. Bank of St. Lawrence River, 1865 in Canadian Views and Studies by an Amateur: Photographic Views and Studies of Canadian Scenery, by Alexander Henderson, 1865, p.34 , albumen print, 110 x 187 mm image, on 320 x 445 mm page.

Courtesy: Library and Archives Canada: Literary and Historical Society of Quebec Collection / 1983-069 / PA-135014.
NORTH AMERICAN WIGWAM and companion prints titled The Birch Bark Canoe and The Wigwam, a Canadian Scene at Penllergare present variations on a forest scene: teepee-like structure perched on the far bank, steps lead to fishing nets at the water’s edge, a waiting birchbark canoe in the foreground. Assembled, in all likelihood, for the enjoyment of family and friends, this wilderness prospect has been described as “a fine example of the seriousness with which the Victorians took their amusements.” Photographed by British pioneer of the medium John Dillwyn Llewelyn at Penllergare, his estate in South Wales, these fantasy impressions of a “Canadian scene” are more photographic fiction than visual fact. Exhibited in 1856 in London, they likely would have circulated to Llewelyn’s social circle, which included luminaries of British science in the Royal Society, the Linnaean Society, and the Swansea Literary and Philosophical Society, as well as pioneers of the new medium in the Photographic Society, the Photographic Exchange Club, and the Amateur Photographic Association.

The inspiration for Llewelyn’s carefully constructed tableau is not known. Perhaps it was the Canada display at the Great Exhibition of 1851, where birchbark canoe and forest products, fur pelts and stuffed animals figured prominently. Perhaps it was travel literature, a globe-trotting house guest, or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s recently published Songs of Hiawatha. Quite possibly it was William Henry Bartlett’s frontispiece engraving for N. P. Willis’s Canadian Scenery, published in London in 1842. Titled Wigwam in the Forest, the Bartlett engraving included all the elements in Llewelyn’s scene: shore, trees, canoe, and wigwam against a dense forest backdrop. Viewed thus, North American Wigwam, although neither taken by a Canadian nor taken in Canada, can be considered an essential piece of Canadian iconography. A combination of art, artifact, and artifice, it is not a record of facts about the Canadian forest or the aboriginal peoples who dwelled there, but rather an example of the way prevailing perceptions of land and life in mid-nineteenth-century Canada were disseminated to, and interpreted by, the elite of British society.
Figure 5. John Dillwyn Llewelyn (1810-1882)

*North American Wigwam*, ca. 1855, albumen print, 187 x 242 mm.

Courtesy: Library and Archives Canada: John Dillwyn Llewelyn Collection / 1988-060 / PA-164777.
Figure 6. William Notman (1826-1891)


A Chance Shot [from the Caribou Hunting series]. Photographed from Nature by W. Notman, Montreal, 1866. Copyright Secured albumen print, 98 x 119 mm image, on 330 x 225 mm page.
“NATURE HAS BEEN CAUGHT—not napping but alive!” declared Edward L. Wilson, editor of The Philadelphia Photographer when A Chance Shot appeared as a mounted photograph on the frontispiece of the May 1866 issue of North America’s premier photographic journal. “Out of doors has been brought indoors with the elements, and photographed in a group, yea! in a number of groups, and different positions. ... we have never seen anything more successful and true to nature, without being nature itself.” Available for purchase as a single print or as part of a set, A Chance Shot was “photographed from Nature” in a second floor “operating room” of William Notman’s Montreal studio, in part to overcome the technical limitations of wet-plate photography in sub-zero temperatures. In this tableaux of Colonel Rhodes, the self-styled Nimrod of the North, and his native guide Octave, a vision of Canada as the Great White North was expressed and constituted. Notman’s realistic illusions contributed to the construction of an imaginative geography of Canada—already begun by writers and artists—as a place of winter, wilderness, and wild animals.

Praised by Wilson as “a truthful account of the sports, pleasures, and perils, of a Cariboo hunt in snowy Canada,” Notman’s hunting scenes show hunters, guides, and companions posed in situations that serially form a narrative about caribou and moose hunting in Canada. But Notman’s hunting series were not simply an artistic effort to promote the attractions of Canada’s harsh climate and rugged landscape for sportsmen. And they were more than just another example of the Victorian predilection for “dress up.” If, as in North American Wigwam (Figure 5), we probe beyond issues of art and artifice, we can see these photographs as part of a larger performance of identity through which the virile attributes of the British imperial male were expressed and moral worth was acquired through “contact with Nature” and the gentlemanly pursuit of sport hunting.

A Chance Shot, Young Canada (Figure 1), and the portrait of Lady Dufferin that follows (Figure 7) point to the use of photographs not simply to document reality, but to evoke it. Sometimes overtly manipulated, cleverly posed, or patently artificial, such fanciful images, while stretching the limits of photographic “truth,” constitute the material evidence of an act of communication, and, as such, demand investigation for the messages they were intended to convey about British North American place and identity.
THIS FAMILY PORTRAIT, taken by William James Topley, proprietor of the Ottawa branch of the Notman Studio, shows Lady Dufferin, wife of the Governor-General of Canada, and her children in an artificial winter setting, wearing wool and fur coats, hats, scarves, and mitts, dusted with fake snow, against a pale painted backdrop with bare branches for seasonal effect. Registered with the copyright office, and thereby protected against unlawful reproduction, this was not a private, family photograph, but rather a commercial image offered for public sale. However, it is much more than a souvenir record of the vice-regal family’s fashionable apparel or sporting activities. Replete with symbols of seasonal outdoor activities—the sash of the habitant, snowshoes, toboggan, sleigh, and fur robe—it offered a visual counterpart to the many references in Lady Dufferin’s journal to sub-zero temperatures, appropriate dress, and skating and tobogganing at Rideau Hall. In one such entry, she writes: “A beautiful, ideal winter day; the ground and trees white with snow, blue sky, and bright sun. ... The only drawback to going out here is the amount of dressing one has to do to prepare for it. There are over-stockings, over-boots, over-etc.s. of all descriptions to be put on; there are fur caps, fur gloves, muffs, etc., etc. But once out it is delightful, and most exhilarating.”

The Notman studio gained an international reputation for such indoor winter portraits. Some, for example Young Canada (Figure 1) or A Chance Shot (Figure 6), recorded individuals in snowy settings; others were cut and pasted onto painted backgrounds to produce composite photographs of skating, curling, snowshoeing, and tobogganing groups. All reinforced the impression that Canadian nature, long associated with the cold and snow of winter, could be conquered, at least photographically.

In this studio portrait, Lady Dufferin and her children set an example for families of social standing. Winter, it would seem, was nothing to fear. Dressed appropriately, one could experience and even enjoy healthful outdoor winter recreation. This scene of the vice-regal family not only reflected the place of winter and snow in the popular imagination, but also evidenced Canadian hardiness inherent to place, exemplified British fortitude in the face of physical hardship, and furnished a standard of vigor for others, both at the imperial center and on the colonial periphery, to admire and emulate.
Figure 7. William James Topley (1845-1930)

The Notman Studio, Ottawa) Studio portrait of Lady Dufferin and children in a winter setting, 1873. Copy Deposited, No.394, cabinet card albumen print, 165 x 108 mm.

ON AUGUST 10, 1859, WHEN an international delegation met aboard the French naval vessel *Gassendi* in St. John’s harbor to settle a diplomatic dispute involving the French fishery in Newfoundland, three photographs of different areas of the treaty shore were presented by the French Commissioners to their British counterparts. Part of the official proceedings, these photographs were active participants in the process by which the French government documented the nature of place and negotiated the use of space. While Paul-Émile Miot’s photographs are now valuable sources of visual facts about past landscapes and activities on the French Shore, research value also resides in the function they were initially created to perform. An integral part of government documentation of French naval, hydrographic, and fishery operations, his photographic documentation of the communities of St. George’s and Conche were employed as a visual argument about the spread of English settlers along the treaty shore, to which the French objected. They teach us to think of photographs as active rather than passive, and to ask why they were taken, how they were used, and what they were expected to do.

A lieutenant in the French Navy, Miot first visited Newfoundland in 1857 on a double mission to monitor the fishery and carry out hydrographic reconnaissance, and then served on several subsequent missions. Upon his return to France over the winter of 1862-63, Miot established a formal photography workshop at the Dépot des Cartes et Plans de la Marine, which had been operating unofficially on his initiative since 1857. During his seasons on the French Shore, Miot produced an extensive record of the settlements, harbors, fishery, and landscapes around the Northern Peninsula and Cape Breton, as well as portraits of his fellow officers. His ethnographic record of the local Mi’kmaq and his later work in French Polynesia found a ready audience in Second Empire France, where there was keen interest in the strange lands and peoples of imperial possessions. Purportedly a source of inspiration in the work of Paul Gaugin, Miot’s photographs of the inhabitants of Tahiti and the Marquesas contributed further to his reputation as a photographer of exoticism.

*Préparation de la morue* was one of two Miot photographs used as the basis of a composite drawing of French fishing activities at Cap Rouge to illustrate an extract of Comte de Gobineau’s *Voyage à Terre-Neuve* published in *Le Tour du Monde* in 1863. Other Miot images received widespread public exposure when they were reproduced as engravings in the French pictorial publications *Le Monde Illustré* and *L’Illustration*. This photograph of cod being dried on the beach at Cap Rouge furnishes a historical basis for visualizing the narrative in Marlene Creates’ assemblage, *Our Coastline is Natural & Scenic*, which follows (Figure 9).
Figure 8. Paul-Émile Miot (1827-1900)

Preparation de la morue (Cod preparation), Cap Rouge, Newfoundland, 1857-1859. Albumen print, 185 x 253 mm.

IN LANGUAGE AND LAND USE, Newfoundland, 1994, Marlene Creates explores “the territory that is under the influence of the printed public message.”

Central to this series are the posted signs that regulate human activities in such public spaces as parks, campgrounds, and historic sites. Through assemblages, each consisting of black-and-white photographs, a handwritten text, and found objects from the site, Creates challenges viewers to ponder the changing, culturally constructed meaning of landscape. Her aim is to expose “the different layers of history—‘natural’ and human—that can occur in the same place.”

The three-part panorama in one assemblage shows a curving stretch of cobble beach, an oil tank at the far left, houses at the far right. In the central photograph, the public sign reads, Our Coastline is Natural & Scenic. Why Spoil the Look? Thank You for Not Littering. Displayed directly below the central photograph, Creates’ handwritten text stands in stark visual contrast to the official printed sign. In relating her subjective experience, she introduces an intertextual understanding of this space:

“In this whole area,” the curator at the nearby museum told me, “they spread acres and acres of beach rocks for drying fish. The rocks, being round, leave air pockets between them,” he explained, “and of course the sun heats them up. It’s a French technique that comes from Brittany. This place was first settled by the French in the 1600s. Just four miles away there were English people and they used flakes for drying fish. Even where the oil tanks are, all that was what they called beaches. You see remnants of it everywhere and there’s only one reason for the beach rocks to be there, it’s because someone hauled them up there.” He continued, “Most of the people who tended the fish were women. ... The widows would be given preference to work on the beaches. They wore long black dresses and black sunbonnets. In those days there used to be quite a few widows, because if there was a schooner lost with all hands, as high as twenty-six people could go down with it.” I met an elderly man who was taking a walk along the beach with his son and daughter-in-law. They were visiting from another part of Canada. The man told me his mother used to work along here, supervising the fish-drying. “She was the boss of the beaches,” he said.

In juxtaposing the visual evidence and verbal explanation which frame the current use and historical origins of the beach, Creates makes visible the “layers of language and narrative hovering over and infused in the land.” Where the posted sign exposes contemporary assumptions about what is “natural,” the text reveals the gendered environmental history of the landscape.
Our Coastline is Natural & Scenic, assemblage from the series Language and Land Use, Newfoundland 1994 consisting of three black-and-white, selenium-toned silver prints, each 16 x 20 in.; handwritten text panel, pencil on matboard, 10 x 12 in.; and found objects from the site.
WHEREAS BRITISH COLUMBIA’S natural environment is now celebrated as wilderness in popular magazines, tourist brochures, and conservationist literature, pioneer photographers paid far less attention to the scenic beauty of the natural surroundings than to the imprint newcomers were making on it. In the summers of 1867 and 1868, pioneer B.C. photographer Frederick Dally made two trips to Barkerville to take advantage of the market for views of the Cariboo gold rush. “What more acceptable souvenir can be sent to one’s friends than a carte-de-visite [a small, card-mounted photograph, usually a portrait] or a view of the scene of labor in which the wanderer from home is engaged?” asked the editor of the Barkerville newspaper. Photographs commissioned as personal mementoes by claim owners were subsequently reprinted and found their way into albums compiled by colonial administrators, naval officers, Victoria merchants, and souvenir seekers. Panoramas of hillsides scarred by hydraulic mining operations spoke to the Victorian enthusiasm for signs of the transformation of the natural landscape in the name of civilization and economic development in far corners of the British Empire.

The Six-toed Pete Claim was just one of many “celebrated claims” photographed by Dally and others on the gravels of Williams, Lightning, Lowhee, Mosquito, and other creeks. The images all have a formulaic sameness about them: men posed proudly, surrounded by the inevitable havoc of rock tailings, flumes, ladders, and sluice-boxes. In the background are stump-covered hillsides where trees have been cut for the lumber needed to build the flumes, shafts, and Cornish wheels of the mining claims, as well as the shops, saloons, and shanties of the mining towns.

Fast forward to the scars of another rapacious extraction industry in British Columbia. If the environmental impact of denuded hillsides was far from a concern for the fortune-seekers photographed by Frederick Dally, clear-cut mountainsides held a very different meaning for the tree-planters who, along with the landscapes they worked (see Figure 11), were photographed by Lorraine Gilbert in her series Shaping the New Forest some 125 years later.
Figure 10. Frederick Dally (1838-1914)


*Six-toed Pete Claim*, Williams Creek, Cariboo District, B.C., 1867-68 albumen print, 182 x 227 mm, in album p.59.
PHOTOGRAPHY “FIXES” an image, but it is only the visual content of the photograph that is fixed and stable. The image’s import—the message it is expected to deliver, its meaning—is not an observable property and can change dramatically between author/photographer and audience/viewer. Look at Lorraine Gilbert’s diptych, *Logging Roads, Invermere*. Imagine, for a moment, that it is available through a stock photo agency. Consider the possible scenarios. The nearby town council employs it to show employment opportunities in an economically depressed region. The Sierra Club incorporates it into arguments about the destruction of western landscapes of outstanding natural beauty and the need for sustainable development. The Canadian Wildlife Federation inserts it into its case for preserving the habitat of local wildlife and protecting endangered species. A professor in the faculty of forestry at the University of British Columbia uses it to discuss the efficacy of timber harvesting techniques. The local native band council appends it to its submission concerning a land claim adjacent to the mountain. And, finally, the provincial Watershed Stewardship Alliance adopts it to warn of changes in runoff and groundwater levels. How could one image be used to support such diverse and divergent arguments?

*Logging Roads, Invermere* is not available from a stock photo agency. Gilbert controls its use, and has, in fact, refused to allow her work to be published in the
annual report of the company responsible for the clear cutting. In such a real clash of values, the diptych can be seen to generate antithetical meanings between Gilbert—who holds a degree in environmental biology and began tree-planting when she left graduate study in forestry to pursue a career as an artist, and the company—which presumably viewed the landscape in a very different way and saw in Gilbert’s photograph corporate accomplishment, profit margins, and satisfied shareholders.

It is worth reflecting on this fluidity of meaning—within Gilbert’s image, as well as between Gilbert’s Logging Roads, Invermere and Dally’s Six-toed Pete Claim (Figure 10). What do the facts of these images “mean” when isolated from some larger reality? When published in a textbook or annual report, preserved in an archive, or displayed in a gallery? How do words—captions, database descriptions, wall labels, text—shape their message? Such questions suggest that, beyond content, careful consideration of the contexts of creation, circulation, and viewing are essential to an understanding of how the meaning of photographs, like the meaning of the landscapes they record, change from viewer to viewer, and across time and space.
THE IMPORT AND IMPACT of Robert del Tredici’s photographs of the nuclear industry very much depend on what the photographer provides to the viewer and what the viewer brings to the looking: meaning, like radioactivity, is not a visible component of the physical world. Overtly didactic in presentation, del Tredici’s image of the Stanrock Tailings Wall is accompanied by a text that reads: “The wall of white sand in back of the trees is made up of radioactive mill wastes from uranium mining in the Elliot Lake region of Ontario. More than 100 million tons of these tailings have been deposited directly into the environment. Some of them have been carried by the Serpent River System into the Great Lakes. The radioactive piles are unmarked and are not visible from the road. They will remain hazardous for hundreds of thousands of years.”

Similarly, in his description of the Gaertner Pit at the Key Lake Mine as the most productive uranium mine in the world, del Tredici notes that “Radiation in this pit can be 7,000 times higher than normal background levels.” These and other startling facts frame viewer response to the photographs in del Tredici’s series.

Del Tredici’s photographic critique of nuclear power is intensely and overtly political. Founder of The Atomic Photographers Guild and co-founder of the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility, he was principal photographer for three U.S. government reports on the radioactive cleanup of the U.S. nuclear weapons complex during the Clinton administration. Stanrock Mine and Gaertner Pit, like Gilbert’s visual commentary on the forest industry (Figure 11) and Burtynsky’s on manufactured landscapes (Figure 13), address abstract ideas and social experience—aspects of the landscape we cannot see. And, like Creates (Figure 9), del Tredici employs pictorial polemics between image and text to make culturally visible the nuclear technologies that have changed the nature of our world and which, for the most part, have eluded our ability to visualize them.
Figures 12a, 12b. Robert del Tredici (b.1938)

Stanrock Mine, Elliot Lake, Ontario, Canada, 25 August 1986 (above); Gaertner Pit, Key Lake Mine, Northern Saskatchewan, Canada, September 17, 1986, (right); silver gelatin prints from the series At Work in the Fields of the Bomb, 1986.
Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky calls his large-scale, richly saturated color photographs “reflecting pools of our times.” Represented by leading art dealers and held in major museum and corporate collections around the world, Burtynsky’s work carries environmental concerns into the very heart of the high profile art world. Yet his images of mine tailings, densified oil filters, scrap metal, and rebar production are the antithesis of the landscape aesthetic of wilderness appreciation and preservation celebrated in a recent spate of major exhibitions of the work of Ansel Adams.

Burtynsky’s iconic image, Nickel Tailings No. 34, Sudbury, Ontario 1996, reproduced here as well as on the cover of the book and DVD Manufactured Landscapes, has come to symbolize his exploration of “Nature transformed through industry.” Drawn to the “residual landscapes” of industrialization and globalization, Burtynsky seeks out subjects “rich in detail and scale yet open in their meaning” and those places outside of our normal experience, which help to produce, or are the product of, our Western consumer lifestyle—railcuts, recycling yards, mine tailings, quarries, oil fields, and refineries. Burtynsky’s work has occasionally been criticized for beautifying the ugly, but he maintains that his images are meant “as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear.” A champion of environmental sustainability, he focuses attention on the visible traces of the Western world’s ecological footprint, from shipbreaking in Bangladesh to e-waste recovery in China, from tire piles in California to urban renewal in Shanghai. While manifesting the “uneasy contradiction” between consumption and concern, Burtynsky’s photographs do not prescribe a way of seeing; nor do they declare what is right or wrong. By holding up a mirror to what we are doing to the planet, he seeks to nurture a way of seeing the world anew, of thinking about it differently.

The inclusion of Burtynsky’s photographs in Art in Action: Nature, Creativity and our Collective Future, sponsored by the United Nations Environmental Program and the Natural World Museum and published by Earth Aware Editions in 2007, makes clear the context and import of his work. As the curator’s note explains, “In the environmental realm, science and art are inextricably linked. While science determines how we measure the health of our planet, art allows us to visualize our relationship to the natural world.”

Conclusion: New Questions, New Answers

Writing about the use of photographs in the pursuit of state and local history, Thomas Schlereth once observed that, traditionally, historians have not posed questions “in ways that photographic data can answer directly.” We tend to ask what they are of, what they show us. We look to them for facts—how big, how long, how many, what color. We rely on them as surrogates for firsthand seeing, to extend the powers of human observation across space and across time. The visual
turn in the humanities and social sciences has demonstrated that we need to change our approach to photographs in two fundamental ways: we need to be more imaginative about the questions we pose to them and we need to be more receptive to the questions they pose to us. This means going beyond the visual facts, to ask what those visual facts were intended to convey, what they meant for different viewers at the time the photograph was created or subsequently circulated. It also requires that we try to imagine what cannot be seen in a photograph, to visualize what existed before or occurred soon after the photograph was taken, or to recognize what has been avoided, what is conspicuous by its absence.

In Lorraine Gilbert’s series *Shaping the New Forest*, we cannot see, but can only imagine, the diversity of tree species that have been clearcut, the animal habitats that thrived before the loggers arrived, or the monoculture after the tree planters leave. Radioactivity is the invisible focus of Robert del Tredici’s photographs of the nuclear industry. Geological time, the international border, and the different gauges of American and Canadian railways are meaningful elements in William England’s *Niagara Suspension Bridge*, yet they cannot be seen. Sometimes what we see in a photograph is more about what we believe than what is actually there in plain view. Hime’s *The Prairie, on the Banks of Red River, Looking South*, is a photograph of treelessness; it is also an image full of expansionist dreams. In *Our Coastline is Natural & Scenic*, Creates reveals that the beach is not “natural” at all. William Notman’s *Young Canada* embodies the
optimism of a youthful nation. The aesthetic dimension of environmental disasters—one natural, the other engineered—is expressed in Alexander Henderson's *Spring Inundation* and Edward Burtynsky's *Nickel Tailings No. 34*, but to very different ends: where the former was used to promote photography as fine art, the latter champions the environment through fine art photography.

As “views of nature,” these images can be coaxed to reveal cultural constructions of the environment. What, we may ask, is the effect of interposing the photograph between physical spaces and viewers, adding one layer of socially constructed meaning to another? How are photographs part of the way we have come to talk and think about the environment? How have photographs helped to define the terms we use when we talk about the environment, and how do these terms relate to each other: nature? landscape? ecology? How do photographs embody, project, construct, confirm, contest the values and assumptions that we assign to the landscapes—natural, built, engineered—in them? These and other questions swirl in and around the photographs in this gallery. Embraced not as illustrations but as primary sources, and employed as a means to ponder human relationships with and shifting attitudes toward nature, photographs can help us ask new questions, find new answers, and reach new understandings in the study of environmental history.

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NOTES


12. For texts accompanying these images, see: http://www.voxphoto.com/cv/deltredici_r.html. Robert del Tredici’s images can also be viewed on the website of the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility at: http://www.ccnr.org/. For a comparison with Edward Burtynsky’s large-format color images of the uranium tailings at Elliot Lake, see Burtynsky’s Breaking Ground: Tailings series at: http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/.
15. See Lori Pauli, Manufactured Landscapes: The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, in association with Yale University Press, 2003). Manufactured Landscapes, the award-winning 2006 documentary film by Jennifer Baichwal, is now on DVD.