

Roger Hall, Gordon Dodds and Stanley Triggs, *The World of William Notman: The Nineteenth Century Through a Master Lens*

JOHN E. CARTER

Hall, Roger, Dodds, Gordon and Triggs, Stanley. *The World of William Notman: The Nineteenth Century Through a Master Lens*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1993. 240 pp., 175 duotones, 70 illustrations. Cloth \$100.00, ISBN 0-7710-3773-2.

It is all in the name, really; *The World of William Notman: The Nineteenth Century Through a Master Lens*. This fine volume comprised of text and photographs, is, in fact, Notman's world, both the one that he encountered and the one that he wished would be.

The book begins with an introduction and six short chapters that sketch Notman's life, detail the history of the studio, and examine the impact of the Notman enterprise on both Canada and the United States. The scholar who uses this volume will be indebted to the authors for a sophisticated analysis that remembers that Notman and his staff were not aloof and dispassionate recorders of the events that swirled around them, but rather participant-observers living in a Canada that was full of itself.

All too often, in an unnecessary apology to art history, we try to reincarnate photographers of the past into artists of the present. Because the past is, by its nature, exotic and distant from us, we find no difficulty whatsoever in discovering a beauty which we willingly attribute to an art that does not exist, and craft metaphors from the past whose meanings are grounded in the images of the present. Though it is not my purpose here to play the iconoclast, I would suggest that the importance of work like that of the photographs of the Notman studio and its contemporaries lie in what the photographer saw, and what he or she reflected, and not in a dormant aesthetic awaiting an appreciative audience.

Notman's was a world full of promise. Escaping a personal financial calamity in his native Scotland, he landed on the shores of a Canada that was taking its full measure in the British Empire.

As one born and raised in the heartland of the United States, the image that I have of imperial Britain is one of colonial dominance.

I can still remember the history classes that talked of the bravery of our forefathers casting off the yoke of British oppression. I was a bit staggered, therefore, by the very idea of the empire as a dream in which one participated.

That realization, for me, was high drama. I found myself vicariously sharing Notman's genuine excitement for the world around him and his part in that world. The authors succeeded in bringing to me, distant though I am from the story they tell, the spark that was Notman's genius. A competent craftsman? Yes. But beyond the craft is an inspired vision of nationhood that boils beneath the surface of every photograph.

After the American Civil War, Notman's influence spread comfortably into the re-invigorated northern United States. This, too, was a revelation to me. Though distinct, Canada and the United States are historically, culturally, and geographically bound. Certainly the entrepreneurial spirit that Notman evidenced was highly valued on both sides of the border. In the United States, the equivalent of the imperial vision rose in the concept of manifest destiny. Thus the visual metaphors that Notman employed in Canada translated quite comfortably to the nation to the south. This linkage of two visions of nationhood was an unexpected delight.

The text which constitutes the first third of *The World of William Notman* does a masterful job of establishing a relationship between the photographer and the world around him. But more than that, it shows how that photographer internalized the values of his society and turned them into icons. And it is as iconographer that Notman is both interesting and significant.

The book implies, and I agree, that as Notman saw Canada, so Canada came to see itself. The patriarch of the history of photography, Beaumont Newhall, anointed Notman "Canada's first internationally known photographer." A fitting appellation, indeed, for like his American contemporary, Mathew Brady, Notman must be credited with visually defining an epoch.

It is the great fortune of the citizens of both the United States and Canada that in 1956 the collection of prints and negatives from the Notman Studio were donated to the McCord Museum at McGill University in Montreal. There the Notman Photographic Archives hold a visual treasure in trust for both the present and the future.

And what of these photographs? Fully two-thirds of *The World of William Notman* is comprised of exquisitely reproduced prints from this collection. In the previous issue of *Material History Review* I examined two films that centred on Notman's work, *Notman's Way* and *Fixed in Time*. As I observed in that review, these are fine films, and they do much to explain Notman's milieu. But, given the opportunity to view the book along side them, they left me feeling uncomfortably controlled.

My discomfort stemmed, I think, from the licence that motion picture takes with the nature of the still picture. In the film, the eye is guided by the will of the filmmaker. The book permits the reader to choose his or her own path.

Recently, Ric Burns, a filmmaker of some modest achievement in this genre, took issue with a suggestion that I made to the effect that in film you are at liberty to examine the broad vistas of history in a roller coaster ride of emotion from point to point. I was, of course, thinking of my own response to the epic series, "The Civil War," which he produced with his brother, Ken. This response, he argued, comes only when the filmmaker succeeds in seducing his audience into believing that what they see is real.

Film, therefore, must be slavishly linear. In the case of history, Burns suggests, that linearity *must* be temporal. The audience must be made to sense time passing logically from cause to effect, from action to reaction, for they will be lost if the sense of the real is broken, even momentarily.

It is in this regard that critic's complaints have been most shrill. To work, film demands that the viewer buy into the story as told. Belief is crucial, and it must occur as the piece is being viewed. And thus the conundrum: How can you critically evaluate a piece, question its

arguments, and weigh its conclusion when you must suspend disbelief as a precondition of viewing?

In the end I find film a legitimate and wonderful vehicle for the exploration of the past. In truth, the loudest protests that I have heard are tinged with jealousy of the film's approachability and its capacity to reach a large audience, which is both unfair and too bad.

But it is for that very reason that the book will never be replaced. Not by film, and certainly not by the computer. Neither can duplicate the experience that one has in probing a given image, and drawing from it, at one's own pace, senses and impressions that are totally one's own.

It reflects, perhaps, a lack of grace on my part to admit that when I first come to a work like *The World of William Notman*, I skip right over the text and race to the photographs to indulge myself in that personal discovery. And it is here that such a book will succeed or fail. If the imagination is engaged by the pictures, poor text will do little to tarnish the experience. Likewise superior text will not compensate for inferior photographs.

In the book, one is not bound to the author's order. We are free explore a street scene at leisure, imagining the sounds and smells that one can sense still present in the non-corporeal representation of the city long-past. With the flip of a page one can compare nobility with the working man, or, in a moment of sheer photographic magic, lay Montreal and Philadelphia side-by-side. We may wonder at the meaning of time examining a photograph, taken in 1876, of the skeleton of a prehistoric elephant.

I don't think it a turgid resistance to technology to suggest that this is an experience fundamentally linked to paper. It simply may not be had from a screen.

Successes like *The World of William Notman* are to be prized. In film you are carried, along with the masses, down a common trail. In books such as this, the combination of fine scholarship, excellent photographs, and beautiful reproduction allows the reader an uncommon experience that need not be shared with anyone.