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***Telling Pictures and Showing Stories:
Photographic Albums in the Collection of the
McCord Museum of Canadian History***

Martha Langford

A Short History of the Photographic Album 1860 - 1960

Photography is a fairly recent invention, less than two hundred years old. The photographic album is naturally younger still. The first photographic albums, compiled in the 1830s and '40s, were research notebooks – books of specimens – kept by the inventors of their successful photographic experiments. Though they might have contained pictures of family members or homes, these albums remained within tight social and scientific circles. Elsewhere, photography was flourishing in a form that was completely unsuited to albums. From 1839 to the middle of the 1850s, the most popular photographic process was the daguerreotype, a photographic image formed on a mirrored surface. A unique and delicate object, the daguerreotype came in its own hinged case. Photographic albums came onto the market when photographs became available and affordable as keepsakes and collectibles. In 1854, the carte-de-visite was patented in Paris by the ingenious A.A.E. Disdéri (1819-1899) and quickly gained the status of a fad. William Notman (1826-91), whose first photographic studio was founded in Montreal in 1856, was

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riding a wave of enthusiasm for this new photographic form.

A carte-de-visite is a small photograph (an albumen print, 11.4 x 6.4 cm) individually mounted on a calling card. The form was conceived for portraiture, though other uses would be found. Commissioned in multiple copies, cartes-de-visite were consumables that were offered in person, left as calling cards, and sent for sentimental reasons through the mail. When photographic studios began to offer the cartes-de-visite of the famous – royals, politicians, actresses – these tokens of patriotism and glamour were traded like modern-day baseball cards. Albums were needed for preservation and presentation of these special private collections. Their availability was advertised in the local newspapers. Commercial carte-de-visite albums were designed as bound books, with pages divided into slots that displayed the photographic image securely and also allowed the arrangement of pictures to be changed as the collection's sub-categories expanded. Keeping such an album is like collecting stamps or autographs. These pastimes were well established at the time.

The commercial album did not, however, suit everyone. There was another breed of collector, more adventurous perhaps, who continued to use scrapbooks, cutting up photographs and combining them with sketches, engravings, letters, poetry, pressed flowers, newspaper clippings, and other printed material. In 1873, a column written for "lady readers" of the *Canadian Illustrated News* offered many creative ideas for arranging cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards, designs inspired by heraldry and botanical illustrations. For the imagined readers, the photographic scrapbook is an outlet for creative personal expression, combining the early-nineteenth-century genres of sketchbooks (pictures) or commonplace books (poems and prayers).

Whatever its lineage or inspiration, the photographic album was quickly established

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in the public rooms of affluent homes and its cover improved accordingly. From a sober, leather-bound volume, the album became a decorative object: gilded, chased, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and sometimes garishly decorated with three-dimensional motifs. At once modern and conservative, the photographic album was set to function as an aide-mémoire for personal and collective storytelling.

The design of the photographic album evolved to keep up with the technology. First, photographic studios began to make larger card photographs. Cabinet cards (15.9 x 10.8 cm) were introduced in the 1860s, followed by commercial albums with slots for both sizes, and as the larger picture also grew in popularity, albums for cabinet cards alone. Photographic studios that were producing landscape photographs and urban views also created albums for clients who either picked out the individual prints or commissioned the studio to assemble a thematic album for them. Less ambitious in their scope, though no less interesting, are albums containing scenic view postcards or, as amateur activity begins to increase, combinations of purchased prints and snapshots.

The term 'snapshot' originally meant any photograph taken quickly, but with the late-nineteenth-century introduction of roll film cameras – the famous Kodak camera in 1888, followed by the even more popular Brownie brown box in February 1900 – snapshotting came to be associated with amateur photographers, and especially those dedicated recorders of private life. For this generation's growing stacks of pictures, a bound album was clearly impractical. The expandable snapshot album offered an elegant solution, with its soft leather cover and a simple cord for binding. Pages could be added and subtracted at will, and photo corners held the white-bordered snapshots without damaging them. This style of album suited the more informal natures of the snapshot and snapshotter. Photography and albums adapted to mechanized production and a faster pace of life. At the same time, freedom from the photographic studio encouraged spontaneity and

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experimentation. The snapshot captured private life from a variety of perspectives and this activity has continued in different photographic forms. Variations on the expandable album have remained popular for over a century. Today, many people keep their photographs in binders with plastic sheets that remind us of the modular system developed for cartes-de visite. Scrapbooks and plastic photo corners have resurged in popularity, while the digital revolution has brought us photo album software to manage and share our pictures.

From this short history of the album, certain characteristics of photographic experience emerge. The first is that photographic technology, in general, and the album, in particular, allowed people to enjoy their growing collections of photographs by arranging them in clusters and sequences. It follows that these arrangements served different purposes: albums as collections, memoirs, and travelogues ask us to consider the pastimes and life-experiences of their individual compilers.

Family albums serve the same purposes, but with a stress on defining, recording, and *celebrating* the social and affective unit called 'the family'. The family album belongs to the family, and brings its members together in collective storytelling, but it is also important to consider that the album has been compiled by *someone*. A family album is window on family life opened by the compiler, whether the mother, the father, the aunt, or the brother. Whether the identity of that person is revealed or hidden in the folds of family life, we are conscious of the compiler's vital presence.

An album as collection is a kind of paper museum: groups of objects that somehow relate to each other under a general category or theme. The first albums, as we have seen, were collections of *photographic* specimens and unusual examples of pictures continue to crop up in albums – the compilers love photography, after all! But most of them love photography for what it can do: capture images of the real world for the purposes of contemplation, comparison, and a sense of connection to the depicted figures or scenes. In albums designed for cartes-de-visite, this sense of connection follows the socio-political order of the day. The album opens with portraits of the most important figures – for a British subject, the British royal family – then proceeds in descending order through the European aristocracy, political and cultural giants, before the compiler’s family, friends, and acquaintances come on the scene. Sometimes they never appear as themselves at all, but play-act in their cartes-de-visite. In the Ogilvie Album (MP-1981.32.1-100), a procession of royals ends with a carnival of costumed characters from all around the world. The compiler, W.W. Ogilvie, is among these figures, as are many of his Montreal friends, photographed by Notman. But familiarity is not the theme of this album. In 1862, Ogilvie set out to create a world encyclopedia of famous individuals and exotic types. Photographic studios from all parts of the colonized world furnished him with colourful examples.

The scrapbook approach also continues through this period as exemplified by the Actress Album compiled in Montreal by Hugh Wylie Becket (MP-1978.189.1-129) after 1872. Becket is plainly a fan: his album is dominated by celebrities, mainly actresses, whose portraits are presented on hand-decorated pages. The names of these intriguing women, or their most famous roles, are inscribed in whimsical

vignettes, heraldic banners, and laurel leaves, and there are also a few dates, the latest 1876. A few royals are also featured, Queen Victoria, of course, but also the romantic figures Marie Antoinette, Mary Queen of Scots, and Catherine de Medici whose *painted* portraits have been copied photographically. This album demonstrates the collector's pursuit of a particular subject – fascinating women – and the nineteenth-century photographic studio's supply of art reproductions to satisfy this market. Another interesting feature of the Becket album is its combination of themes. Almost as an afterthought, three sports clubs are represented: the Montreal Gymnastic Club (including one Robt. A. Becket), The Montreal Baseball Club, and the Toronto Lacrosse Club, all taken in 1872, the same year that the album was dedicated. Is this where the collection started? If so, the organization of photographs and their treatment in the album reflects the compiler's change of direction, from athletics to actresses.

Albums as collections are full of such biographical insights, which also inform our knowledge of the culture. The Emily Ross Album (MP-1982.107.1-47), begun in 1869, is a sketchbook for decorative framing motifs and photographic collages, some pregnant with narrative. The decoration was sketched in pencil and painted with watercolour and ink; the photographs have been trimmed to fit the artist's design. Motifs are varied, from simple frames in geometric patterns to leafy, floral arbours with birds. Such creative ideas as medallions adorned with portraits or an extended fan with five photographic blades are topped by the simple device of a carte-de-visite tumbling out of an envelope. The "postmarks" on the envelope connect Kingston and Montreal – many possible plot lines spring to mind. There are 45 photographs in the album: portraits, architecture studies, and photographic reproductions of engravings. Most of the photographs can be traced to the Notman studio. The compiler's collection of copied engravings includes one of John Everett Millais's *The Black Brunswicker* (1860), a love scene between a woman and a departing soldier (Notman I-28174.1). Another Montreal photographer, Alexander

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Henderson, is represented in the album with a view of Lake La Blanche (circa 1866). Emily Ross's paper museum exhibits her own work amidst the sources of her inspiration.

Another album (The Green Album MP-0000.10), circa 1940, is the collection of a Canadian history buff. Prints purchased from Notman, Henderson, Barnes (Wilfrid Molson Barnes, active 1900-1940?) are combined with snapshots, maps, photographic copies of paintings and drawings, and a pressed botanical specimen. Quebec's colonial and military history is the overarching theme, with special emphasis on the Seven Years War and the War of 1812. The personal photographs document the traces of these histories on the landscape with strict objectivity, while the album as a whole testifies to a collector's passion.

Autobiographical albums are like messages in a bottle. The compiler's interesting times are captured photographically and organized into a report that is intended for the future. Two common types of autobiographical albums are the memoir and the travelogue.

A written memoir is a personal account of people, places, and events that have mattered to the author. A photographic memoir is an attempt to narrate and describe these important life-passages in a combination of pictures and captions. Unlike the written memoir, a photographic memoir cannot be conjured up from memory alone: there must be photographs, and this requires some forethought and planning on the part of the compiler. A camera must be part of life's adventure, and even so, we can expect the photographic memoir to have gaps.

A travelogue is the edited diary of a journey which, like most published diaries, emphasizes the exciting parts, good and bad, and leaves out the parts that were dull. In a travelogue, points of interest and fascinating encounters are plotted on memory's map for easy recall in the telling. A journey is generally planned; it has a precise beginning and a decisive end – these moments are often recorded. So a travelogue is about leaving home and coming home, and all the places in-between.

As narratives, memoirs and travelogues are quite easy to follow, moving from stage to stage, or place to place – dates and places often helpfully inscribed. The snapshots are full of life which, in the case of the wartime albums, becomes a source of sadness. The album compiled by William Hilliard Snyder (MP-1992.16) , a young soldier from Vancouver who was killed during the First World War in action near Amiens, covers his last months in Canada. Snapshots of family and friends in

Edmonton, Lake Louise, and Vancouver are combined with pictures of Camp Hughes in Manitoba and outings around Ottawa where he finished his training in musketry before heading overseas. Letters home and other documents in the Archives of the McCord tell the rest of the story.

An album compiled by Cynthia Jones (MP-1986.79.1-226) is another photographic memoir of the First World War. Miss Jones served as a nurse in England and France; her album extends from the 1917 to 1923, covering her wartime service and the following years which included a return trip to Europe. These years are recorded by her own snapshots as well as purchased postcards and cartoons; as the compiler's nursing duties became harder and perhaps more painful, the snapshots dry up. Her tour of duty in France is mostly represented with picture postcards of Canadian field hospitals, including the ruins of the hospital at Étapes after it was bombed. Nursing is lampooned as torture inflicted on patients in cartoons such as "The Chamber of Horrors." At the end of the war, snapshotting resumes. A return to Europe is recorded, as are ski vacations. So, as the dates suggest, this album is not only about the war, but about wartime experience as part of the compiler's life-experience, her coming-of-age and transition into marriage and motherhood.

Beginning in the same post-war period, the albums of a young naval officer are memoirs of service with the Hudson's Bay Company in the Canadian North. An avid amateur photographer, Fred W. Berchem's four albums span seven years, though with overlapping dates: 1920-1921 (MP-1984.126.1-232); 1921-1927 (MP-1984.127.1-151); and 1922-1924 ((MP-1984.128.1-139, MP-1984.129.1-85). In Berchem's orderly and annotated albums, topics of historical interest include seal hunts and shipboard arrangements in a pluralistic floating community – British, Canadian, and Inuit. By contrast, an all-inclusive, somewhat overwhelming survey of the Hudson's Bay Company interests in the North is presented in two large albums compiled by Captain Mack (MP-0000.597.1-527 and MP-0000.598.1-232).

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Mack focusses on the communities formed around trading posts and hunting grounds. A curious episode is the arrival by ship of a herd of Norwegian reindeer, accompanied by Laplanders who are supposed to introduce the animals into the Canadian North.

A carte-de-visite album can also constitute a memoir from which a life story can be told. The Birch Album (MP-0000.2160) is inscribed: "Richard J.W. Birch, Oct. 13th 1862. A present from himself." Its 46 cartes-de-visite are primarily drawn on Birch's military service with the 30th Regiment at Quebec City. The use of pictures as *aide-mémoires* for storytelling is very clear in this album. While the names of the sitters are inscribed on the back of the cartes, this information is hidden from the casual viewer. Birch held the key to the album – he knew the names of the sitters and how he felt about them. He sends one message into the future: "Lieut Clower 30th Reg. Nuckle headed monster" is inscribed on the back of Clower's portrait.

Cartes-de-visites carry the stamps of their studios which help us to reconstitute the travels of the subjects or collectors. In the album of Montreal industrialist J.T. Molson (MP-0000.2359), cartes-de-visite taken in Scotland and Italy are photographic records of his travels abroad. Commissioned self-portraits, they are the kernels of stories. Albums of cartes-de-visite showing monuments and works of art also function as travelogues. The anonymous Cannon Album (MP-0000.1993.1-1983), so-called for the motif on the cover, contains 198 cartes-de-visite of historic sites, buildings, and works of art, many from the Vatican. For the actual traveller, these images prompted memories and stories. For the armchair traveller, living in a world without illustrated art books or television documentaries, these small black-and-white images sparked dreams of seeing these places and treasures through one's own eyes.

A real share in the tourist's experiences – good and bad – comes with the snapshot.

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MacDonnell European Travel Album(MP-0000.2151.1-24) is really about touring, as it was in Scotland and England in the early twentieth century. Many photographs feature the MacDonnell's car and the never-ending problems of driving over bumpy roads that are sometimes inconveniently blocked by sheep. Sightseeing is something that happens between mishaps. The compiler revels in automotive adventures with captions such as, "14 Punctures in one tire in one day."

Modes of transport and signs of progress feature in the itinerary in another carefully compiled travel album: *Bloemfontein to London, Via East Coast, Egypt and the Continent / M.C.B and C.J.A. / Feby to May 1910* (MP-0000.2152). This album chronicles a journey from what is now South Africa to England. The travellers, an engineer and his female companion, are going home. Along the way, they are drawn to particular kinds of sites. Those found in guide books of the period include natural wonders and colonial plantations. Our travellers are also attracted to Christian missions, rail lines, government installations, and feats of engineering, with a distinct emphasis on the new. In Egypt, the Suez Canal is found far more fascinating than the pyramids. In fact, European interests in Africa are magnets for these travellers, and it is only when they reach continental Europe that they indulge in a bit of Grand Touring, a passage cut short by the death of Edward VII.

When the travellers reach their ultimate destination, they find themselves at home. Home is where the photographic moments will be transformed into prints, assembled in an album, and put to use as an instrument of show-and-tell. In this way, interesting times and exotic places are absorbed into the collective memory of the family.

Charles-Philippe Beaubien, a lawyer, born in Montreal in 1870, was a passionate amateur photographer who compiled many albums. According to his granddaughter, Gretta Chambers, these albums often opened with pictures that he took on his travels. In the Charles-Philippe Beaubien Album 1903-1908 (MP-1990.42), a European tour, beautifully photographed, leads into pictures of the Beaubien family at their city and country homes. Beaubien photographed their rituals, pastimes, playfulness, and reflective moments. As a member of this charmed circle, Beaubien's snapshot style is by no means objective. On the contrary, he seeks photographic opportunities to express the closeness and spontaneity of his family. Photography is a way of participating in family life.

The albums in the collection of the McCord Museum remind us that there are many ways of defining 'family' and representing this unit photographically. The Frothingham and Benson albums (N-1986.85.1-48, N-1986.86.1-74, and N-1986.87.1-32) are illuminating in this regard. Covering several generations, they show how photography could be used to illustrate and strengthen the family. As early as the 1870s, the Frothinghams were confirmed photographic enthusiasts who patronized William Notman & Sons for cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards, including hilarious family groups 'tobogganing' on a Notman photographic set. The daughters' poses displayed their mutual affection and individual talents for music. Milestones are marked; rituals are celebrated. The Frothinghams also commissioned photographs of family, friends, and servants at their country home at Rivière du Loup. When Etheldred Norton Frothingham became Mrs George Benson, she continued the family tradition. Beginning her album with pictures of her own childhood, she then commissioned a Notman studio portrait to chronicle the arrival

of each of her children. The two boys and one girl are then photographed in charming group portraits as they grow. This ritual continues until the onset of the First World War, when the eldest poses in his uniform. A curiosity in the Benson family album is the virtual absence of the father, George Benson, who unlike his in-laws, seems to have avoided photographic opportunities. The Benson album carries on a tradition from the Frothingham side.

Looking at albums in museum collections brings different family histories, and expressions of kinship, to light. The Lafleur Album (MP-0000.2155), compiled between 1880 and 1900, shows how private life, family life, and public history intersect. The album appears to have come from the family of Reverend Theodore Lafleur (1821-1907), a Baptist missionary active in Longueuil and Montreal and closely associated with the Grande-Ligne Mission, founded in 1835 by Swiss and French evangelists. Lafleur probably met his future wife, a French woman, while studying theology in Geneva. A history of Protestant evangelism in Québec is embedded in this family album whose portraits can be traced to studios in the Northeast of the United States, as well as the Notman studio in Montreal. At the same time, the album preserves the family's links to French relatives, as well as the daughter's school chums. This family album is the photographic centre of many circles – familial, social, and vocational.

Even when an album concentrates on family and close friends, the collection is far from static. Changes in family structure are continuous and albums reflect these shifts. Two Molson family albums illustrate private lives in transition. One of these albums (MP-0000.1768) is tied to the marriage of John Thomas Molson (1837-1910) and Lillias Savage (1839-1866). The album contains portraits of the couple and their daughter Lillias. After the mother's death, the album was continued, and indeed contains portraits of the second Mrs Molson, Jennie B. Butler (1850-1926) and the first children of this marriage. No larger than a prayer book, this album

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must have belonged to John Thomas Molson for it documents family from the perspective of a young husband, father, widower, husband again, and father of a growing family – the album corresponds to his joy, grief, and recovery. The J.T. Molson Album (MP-0000.2359) was likely compiled by Jennie B. Butler Molson, for there are no portraits of the first Mrs Molson and stepdaughter Lillias is seen within an extended family of children, aunts, and uncles from both sides. This larger album is also a more public document that confirms the cohesion of a blended family.

As a museum of Canadian social history and the custodian of the Notman Photographic Archives, the McCord Museum has made a remarkable commitment to the collection and preservation of photographic albums. More than 250 albums contain a wealth of visual information and extraordinary insights into past lives. These albums come to life in the present when we consider the social contexts of the compilers – their photographic experiences and uses of photographic technology. Compilers of albums are photographic storytellers who use pictures in the show-and-tell of their lives. Albums show what can be shown, and they also keep secrets whose existence can be intuited from what is *not* shown, from the album's changes of direction and gaps. An album in a public collection can be approached as we approach our own photographic albums, eager to travel through time and space, and bursting with questions. Curiosity, compassion, memory, and imagination reignite the album's suspended conversations.