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"Notman's Maple Box"

Robert G. Wilson

Stereo World, January/February 1997, Volume 23, Number 6

A Royal Inauguration

The first decade of growth for railways in Canada occurred in the 1850s when a number of companies built lines in both Canada West (now Ontario) and Canada East (now Quebec). By late 1858, there were rail lines from Windsor and Sarnia in Canada West to the ice free port at Portland, Maine with the exception of a bridge across the St. Lawrence River. This last link in the continuous line to the ocean was completed on 17 December 1859, when the first official train passed over the newly completed Victoria Bridge which crossed the St. Lawrence River at Montreal. In the summer of 1860, Queen Victoria's son, Albert Edward, H.R.H. the Prince of Wales and heir to the British throne, visited Canada to officially open the bridge. To commemorate the visit, the Canadian government presented the Prince with a portfolio of photographs taken by William Notman.

Being a good businessman, Notman understood the promotional possibilities that these photographs represented, and made a duplicate set which he retained. He also photographed the set in stereo, which was listed in his 1860 catalog and could be purchased for 40 cents each or \$4.50 a dozen. Notman sent his duplicate presentation set to the 1862 International Exhibition in London, where he was awarded a medal "for excellence in an

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extensive series of photographs." After the exhibition, it was returned to Montreal where it was on display in the Notman studio in 1864. It remained in the Notman collection through several studio moves. When the Notman family sold the company in 1935, they retained the set and eventually donated it to the McCord Museum of Canadian History in Montreal in the mid 1950s, where it is now part of the Notman Photographic Archives.

McCord Museum Copy

The duplicate set, currently in the McCord Museum, contains forty original loose pages measuring 21 x 28.5 inches, plus six pages that were added to the portfolio later. On the original sheets are one mammoth plate (18 x 22 inch) of the completed Victoria Bridge, eighteen 10 x 12 inch photos mounted two to a page (mostly showing construction of the Victoria Bridge), and 270 stereoviews mounted nine to a page. The stereos are representative of the Canadian views produced by Notman prior to the visit of the Prince of Wales, and cover the areas of Canada from Riviere-du-Loup and the River Saguenay on the east to London and Niagara Falls on the west. Included in the set are 27 stereo views of the Victoria Bridge, mostly showing the construction. Most of the stereo views in the set are hand titled and numbered in ink, and with only a few exceptions, these notations match the listings in the Notman 1860 catalog.

In addition to these original cards, the McCord set includes three other mammoth plates (one view of Montreal and two duplicates of the Victoria Bridge view already mentioned) and three other sheets of stereoviews (one sheet of views in Quebec Province and two sheets of views of the Great Eastern when it visited Quebec City in July 1861). These are assumed to have been added later, since the card stock is different than the rest of the sheets, there are duplicate views, and the views of the Great Eastern are dated.

The sheets of photographs are stored in two burgundy morocco leather portfolios, one titled *Canada East* in gold on the outside of the cover, the other titled *Canada West*. Along the spine and both the inside and outside edges of each portfolio is a detailed pattern in gold. To hold the portfolios closed, each has two elaborately tooled clasps made of German silver, an alloy of copper and nickel, which have been gilded. The two portfolios are stored vertically in a box covered with bird's-eye maple veneer. The box has handles on the ends and ornaments along all the edges and corners, which are also made of German silver. These fittings have been painted to make them look like tarnished silver. Stored in a special bracket inside the top of the box is a hand held mahogany stereo viewer. This viewer has 1 3/8 inch square lenses with six inch focal length, and is 10 3/16 inches long. The box and portfolios were made by other Montreal firms: the case by J. & W. Hilton, the silver work by R. Hendery, and the portfolios by J. Lovell.

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| Prince of Wales Copy |
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The set of photographs presented to the Prince of Wales was described in a series of letters between William Notman and various government officials (some of which have survived and are now in the National Archives of Canada) and in two contemporary published accounts. In spite of these, there are still a number of unanswered questions about the original set presented to the Prince of Wales. Where is the original set today? What did the set which was presented to the Prince actually look like? Where and when did the presentation take place?

On the request of Stanley Triggs, then curator of the Notman Photographic Archives, an extensive search of the Royal collections has been done and the original box given to the Prince cannot be located. So exactly what the original set looked like is not really known. Since the set in the

McCord Museum was publicized as a duplicate, we should assume that the original looked like the set illustrated here. However, the three contemporary reports of this set of photographs differ in the description of the box and its contents.

The first description exists in a letter dated 1 October 1860, which says that the set contained 315 photographs, in two portfolios:

I have examined the collection of photographs furnished by W. Notman, of Montreal, enclosed in two Morocco-bound Portfolios, and a handsome birds-eye maple case; — with the view of offering an opinion as to their value.

The photographs, mounted on 54 sheets of stout Bristol-board, consist of 10 of the largest sized single plates yet taken in Canada; 13 having two views mounted, of ordinary dimensions — and 31 embracing nine stereoscopic slide views on each separate sheet.

The earliest published description of the gift appeared in October 1860 while the Prince was still in North America. William Notman sent a description of the box and a copy of his stereoview of the set to *The London Photographic News* which reported that it contained a total of 345 photographs in two portfolios:

CANADIAN PHOTOGRAPHS. — We learn from messers. Notman, whose stereographs of Canada we noticed last week, that a set of their photographs was presented to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, by the Provincial Government of Canada. The set comprised 55 sheets imperial 28 ½ x 20 ½, on which were mounted 10 photographs 22 x 18, 20 photographs 12 x 10, and 315 stereoscopic views — all of Canada. They were placed in two handsome morocco portfolios, with solid silver clasps. These again are contained in a case of bird's-eye maple, with solid silver mountings, handles, etc. One of the slides we received was a photograph of this presentation series.

While these two descriptions differ in the number of photographs in the set, they still match the McCord version of the box reasonably well, assuming that some of the original sheets have been removed from the duplicate set and used for other purposes over the years. This is a reasonable assumption as Notman did adjust the contents of the Maple Box for different events. When sent to the 1862 Exhibition, the box included only

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seven mammoth plates, 19 10 x 12 inch photographs, several different sheets of stereoviews and ten sheets of portraits.

A Third Portfolio?

A second published report appeared in London in June 1861, and described this set very differently. *The Illustrated London News* said that it contained about 600 photographs in three different portfolios, reporting:

It was a good notion of the Canadian Government to employ the celebrated photographer Notman, of Montreal, to prepare a series of photographs of all that is interesting in the Canadas and to present it to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales as a souvenir of his visit to the colony. Our illustration represents the case and one of the folios containing the photographs alluded to. It is made to contain three folios, and is a splendid specimen not only of Canadian maple, of which it is constructed, but also of colonial workmanship. The clasps, binding, and angle pieces are of silver, beautifully chased and ornamented. The interior is lined with green velvet. The folios, three in number, are equally beautiful as specimens of colonial skill and taste. Neatly mounted in them are about 600 photographs of all sizes, comprising views of all the great waterfalls, cities, public works, and remarkable places in the colony, as well as of events that occurred during the Prince's visit. The great lakes and the depth of the wilderness have also been photographed, to make the work complete. The whole reflects the highest credit on Mr. Notman, both for the taste and judgment shown in the selection, and the manipulative skill with which the pictures were executed.

The Illustrated London News also published an engraving, describing it as the "case ... presented to the Prince." The case and one folio shown in this engraving appear to be the same as those in the McCord Museum. To produce this engraving, the artist would have needed something to copy. The known stereoview was not likely used since it is so different from the engraving. However, since the same easel appears in both the Notman stereoview and the engraving, it is likely that another Notman photograph was copied to make the engraving; a photograph that would have been taken at the same time that Notman made the stereoview of the duplicate box. If this is the case, then the 1861 engraving is a copy of the duplicate set currently housed in the McCord Museum and not a copy of the set originally

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given to the Prince. This, however, is a mute point if the McCord Museum set is truly identical to that presented to the Prince.

So what did the set presented to the Prince of Wales actually look like? Since Notman described the image on his stereoview as a “duplicate”, and the description in the 1 October 1860 letter (written before the presentation was actually made) described the set with two portfolios, it is likely that the Prince was presented with a set identical to the one in the McCord Museum. So why was *The Illustrated London News* description so different? It is possible that the Prince was given a box with two portfolios containing the views of Canada which was identical to the set in the McCord Museum. In addition, he may have been presented a third portfolio containing the views of the events of his visit. A hint that this could be the case appears in one of William Notman’s letters in which he refers to “the photographs of the Prince of Wales sent to Boston” (note this says photographs “of the Prince”, not “for the Prince”). The Prince visited Boston near the end of his stay in North America. This would explain the third portfolio and the increased number of photographs reported by *The Illustrated London News*, and their comment that the views showed “events that occurred during the Prince’s visit”, but still does not explain their claim that the case was “made to contain three folios.” Perhaps they were wrong on this point. Likely the only way that we will know exactly what was given to the Prince is to wait until the original is located in the Royal storage.

It is also not known exactly when and where the presentation was made, since none of the contemporary newspaper accounts mention it even though they reported daily, and in great detail, about events that occurred during the trip. Notman’s original intent would likely have been for the presentation to be made in Montreal. However, there was a misunderstanding which I will describe later, which likely delayed the presentation. On 12 September 1860, while the Prince was in London,

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Canada West (after he had left Montreal), Notman wrote that the case was packed in Montreal, addressed to Niagara and awaiting delivery instructions so it could be presented while the Prince was still in Canada. So it was likely given to the Prince near the end of his stay in Canada: in Niagara Falls (14-17 September), or in Hamilton (18-19 September). This would have allowed time for news of the presentation to reach England to meet the deadline for the 19 October issue of *The London Photographic News*. The Prince left Canada via Windsor and Detroit on 20 September to begin a month long trip through the northeast United States, staying in Boston on 17-19 October before returning to England from Portland, Maine on 20 October 1860.

A Poorly Paid Commission

The Illustrated London News report also says that the Canadian Government employed Notman to prepare the photographs. The series of letters, however, reveals that it was Notman who conceived the idea and approached the government. Notman suggested the project to the Commissioner of Public Works, and thinking that he had full agreement for the project, proceeded to produce the set. However, the commissioner had only requested a proposal of what Notman contemplated doing and what the probable cost would be. So the set was produced without an agreement upon the price to be paid to Notman. When this misunderstanding was discovered, Notman wrote, "As I am desirous that HRH should be in possession of the series, [I] have no objections to place the matter entirely in your hands, accepting whatever sum you may award for my services. " The government officials then arranged for an estimate of the value of the set, using as a guide the values that Notman photographs had recently been selling for in Montreal. The first estimate came to \$455 (including \$264.50 for the

photographs). In his summary letter, Mr. F.P. Rubidge presented the details of his cost estimate as:

Making, therefore, a liberal allowance for the better mounting, and descriptions thereon, and supposing them to be the choicest and best selected specimens of Mr. Notman's art, (although many of them are very defective) — I have put the following values, as the most liberal that should be offered for the collection.

10 sheets with 1 view on each or 10 photographs @ \$6 — \$60.00
13 sheets with 2 views on each, or 26 photographs @ \$2.50 — \$65.00
31 sheets with 9 Stereoscopic slides or 279 photographs @ \$0.50 — \$139.50
With reference to the value of the Morocco portfolios, I merely offer an opinion, that their (together) — \$60.00
Also that the value of the case, silver mounted — \$125.00
Packing Case, packing etc. — \$5.50
Total — \$455.00

Due to the misunderstanding, and in order not to hold up the presentation of the set, Notman had agreed to accept whatever money was awarded to him. However, he did object to the low value assigned to his photographs:

I may state that even now with the negatives in my possession, I would not get up another set the same, with the care & trouble of mounting, lettering etc. for less than double the amt. of the value now awarded me, & when I state that many of the views were taken with more regard to the completeness of the set than marketable value, & that in Quebec alone I spent more than the sum named, you will see that my acceptance of that sum will entail a considerable pecuniary loss, & hope therefore the valuation will be reconsidered.

However, the value was not reconsidered, and even though Notman claimed to have spent over \$2200 to produce two copies of the set, one of which he retained, it seems that he only received \$264.50. Mr. Hendery, the silversmith, also objected to the value of \$125 for the case, which included only \$100 for the silver work. This led to a second evaluation (\$295.30) and then a third evaluation (\$463.50), which evidently agreed with Hendery's original claim. The last letter of this series, in which the higher value for the silver work was finally set, was concluded with the statement "I sincerely

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trust that we have now heard the last of the vexed question of the case and its belongings." It is unfortunate that William Notman suffered financially in producing the "Maple Box", as this set is referred to at the McCord Museum. It is a fine collection of early photographs of Canada and is certainly the ultimate in stereo boxed sets.

Acknowledgement

I want to thank Stanley Triggs, then curator of the Notman Photographic Archives, for allowing us to photograph the Maple Box, for providing copies of the early reports of this presentation set and for offering some of the details contained in the article.

Sources

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