'A Portable Kit of Images': Photography in Australian and Canadian Literature in English

Russell McDougall

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Recommended Citation

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
'A Portable Kit of Images': Photography in Australian and Canadian Literature in English

Abstract
I had to think about the abstract for this paper at a time when I was rather preoccupied with writing another, not about photography but about the railway, though still with reference to Australian and Canadian literature.* There seemed no relation between the two. But after delivering the railway paper, while browsing in the conference book display area, I happened upon Brian Johnson's and Dudley Whitney's lavish coffee-table presentation of Canada from the train, a photographic production entitled Railway Country.
Shipp breezed through the semi-finals with a healthy spread then finished with a blistering 1.03.91, missing the national mark of 1.01.32 by just a flick of a sheet.

RUSSELL McDOUGALL

‘A Portable Kit of Images’: Photography in Australian and Canadian Literature in English

I think of these photographs as externalized memory rooms, each organized according to its own logic.
...All time becomes present.
(Cheryl Sourkes, on ‘Memory Room’, in Daphne Marlatt, *Touch to My Tongue*)

It’s true that a photograph is a witness, but a witness of something that is no more. ... each perception and reading of a photo is implicitly, in a repressed manner, a contact with what has ceased to exist, a contact with death. I think that is the way to approach photography ... as a fascinating and funereal enigma.

I had to think about the abstract for this paper at a time when I was rather preoccupied with writing another, not about photography but about the railway, though still with reference to Australian and Canadian literature.* There seemed no relation between the two. But after delivering the railway paper, while browsing in the conference book display area, I happened upon Brian Johnson’s and Dudley Whitney’s lavish coffee-table presentation of Canada from the train, a photographic production entitled *Railway Country*. There, in the opening paragraph, I discovered my cue for entering upon this present argument, which is to
consider 'the prevalence of photographs and photographers in Canadian writing' and to ponder briefly the relative indifference to camera culture in Australian writing.

A train is a camera continuously rolling with irretrievable footage. The landscape moves past the window like a motion picture. And for the passenger traveling across Canada, the movie is an epic one, with images that unfold over vast distances.

The importance of the railway in Canada as a potent symbolism for enacting the sense of nation has been argued by a number of writers and critics — D.G. Jones, George Bowering and, of course, Northrop Frye, who goes so far as to say: 'There would be nothing distinctive in Canadian culture at all if there were not some feeling for the immense searching distance, with the lines of communication extended to the absolute limit... If we extend this view of Canadian culture as Railway Country in relation to our previous metaphor — 'a train is a camera' — the argument can be formulated: there would be nothing distinctive in Canadian culture at all were it not for its 'mechanical eye', which, while seeming to document a given reality, in fact creates the reality of what it sees. In this context, photography can be recognised as an act of possession, an 'active' way of seeing Canada, of enacting Canada in the manner of the railway. More generally, Susan Sontag draws attention to the social ritual that is involved in photography, as 'a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power': 'Photographs', she tells us, 'help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure' (On Photography, p. 9).

I want to suggest here that the way of seeing that is evidenced in the literary construction of Canada, even before the invention of the camera, casts the Canadian writer in a role similar to that of the photographer — and that the reality created by Canadian writers is often akin to the captured imagery of a photographed world. So before I go any further I shall simply make a collection of those qualities of mainstream Canadian literature which tend to support the view or to create the concept that Canadian writers have generally adopted a photographic relation to the world:

1) the documentary impulse (itself well documented in Canadian criticism);
2) a closely focused and synthetic vision;
3) a semantic field which simply swarms with signifiers;
4) perhaps because of this, 'poetry of incubus', and in fiction, accumulation and compression of detail;

5) despite this, formal concentration — clear structural lines;

6) a noticeable preoccupation with the problem and play of perspective;

7) incompleteness, the buried assumption being photographic: i.e. 'reality is known by its traces' (*On Photography*, p. 167);

8) related to this, the archaeological model of Canadian literary culture. 'We may have only shards,' says Robert Kroetsch, 'But that's very exciting.' This archaeological attitude is instrumental in the manner of a camera: it establishes 'an inferential relation to the present ... provide[s] an instantly retroactive view of experience' (*On Photography*, p. 167). Further, the archaeological model confirms those qualities of the literature already mentioned — namely, concentration, compression, compilation — qualities which inform a certain cultural style: fragmented and discontinuous. Within its frame, a photograph may seem to offer 'a fictive unity' (*On Photography*, p. 110) — but it is the unity of a single moment, as the frame acknowledges, for a photograph is 'a radical fragment' discontinuous with the flux of time. This is precisely what the writer-as-archaeologist values most — the broken pot — because, as Kroetsch argues, 'it is a trace without being definitive' (*Labyrinths of Voice*, p. 10);

9) the importance of framing devices.

If I am to summarise these points, which are properties in want of a frame, it must be by way of the metaphor which frames my argument: Canadian writing often seems to be compulsively photographic, meaning that it turns experience itself into a way of seeing.

The same cannot be said of Australian writing, in which reality has usually nothing to do with the camera's certification of experience. This is despite a strong tradition in Australia of social realism, despite a strong commitment to matter of fact, a felt responsibility to make fiction true in the manner of things. Of course, such values are now being questioned, and the mainstream tradition is under attack from the margins as well as being dismantled from within. Yet even in contemporary writing photography is not much in evidence.

What is the evidence?

When I say that Canadian writing is compulsively photographic, of course, I am speaking metaphorically. But it is certainly possible to provide explicit evidence of the different relations in Canada compared to
Australia between photography and writing. It is obvious, for example, that in any literary parade of characters there will be many more photographers in Canada than in Australian literature. As Shirley Neuman quips, ‘There are probably even more photographers than there are bears’ in Canadian writing (Labyrinths of Voice, p. 126). Not only are there more photographers, there are also more photographs. This is first of all literally true: I know of no Australian writer who has attempted to create the kind of collage-text that Michael Ondaatje has, for instance; in The Collected Works of Bill the Kid, a fiction which insists upon language and photography as equally essential to its text. But this is not the only way in which photographs signify in Canadian writing, nor in which they fail to signify in Australian writing. What happens when you have a text with photographs, which is then reprinted without photographs? Partly, this is a warning to be aware of how the production of a text influences one’s reading of it. But the trace of an absent photograph, the trace of a trace, often remains to haunt the expurgated variant, and to signify in this way. In her statement at the back of The Long Poem Anthology, which reprints ‘Steveston’ without a single photograph, Daphne Marlatt informs the reader as follows:

the context of the writing was that it was half of a collaboration, the other half being Robert Minder’s photographs...
What the camera sees & what the word says are both aspects of a vision that is larger than either or even both of us...\(^6\)

Turning to ‘Steveston’, in this anthology, the reader will be aware of the absence of the photograph when reading a poem, for instance, entitled ‘Not to be taken’; was a photograph taken or not? why? why not? did reality this time resist being framed, refuse conversion into image, deny definition or limitation? At the margin of the text, in a bracket that fails to close (or perhaps resists closure), words appear paradoxical:

(not to be, NOT TO BE

and later in the text, again at the margin,

(NOT TO BE TAKEN’

What are the consequences of not being taken — not being conquered? possessed? not being consumed as an object? not being patronised? — but also, perhaps, not being documented, and therefore not being seen at all. These are some of the questions that are voiced in the absence of a photograph that might have been taken.

The collaborations between Canadian writers and photographers are
many and various. This is not so in Australia. Exceptions are so few as to prove the rule: Australian writers generally have not acquired the Canadian habit of inserting photographs into a written text. On the other hand, there is a long history of complementing the written word with a painted image — but this is quite a different thing, since a painting or drawing bears witness to the subjectivity of its way of seeing much more obviously than does a photograph, which is generally experienced by the observer as much more real.

I may as well mention one of the exceptions to the rule, Mark O’Connor: a poet who does not include photographs in his text, it is true, but who publicly regrets their omission. O’Connor is an Australian poet who has, in more ways than one, an unusual affinity with Canadian aesthetic theory: for instance, he prefers to work underwater. Nevertheless, no Piper of Arll, he prefers to don a brightly coloured aqualung before he dives. Rumour has it, too, that he carries a special pen for underwater scribbling. But it is not only in sounding and surfacing that this poet laureate of the Great Barrier Reef resembles Canadian writers, for he has also a penchant for the photographic image. In fact, the poem often takes the place of a photograph in his writing; or, to put this another way, the poem explains the photograph so well that to include the photograph itself would be redundant: it has, for all intensive purposes, been explained away. More interesting in this context than O’Connor’s own poetry is the attitude of other Australian poets towards it, the poetry of photographic vision:

Our camera spots a young fellow writing about the Reef — things swarming everywhere, labelled neatly in Latin.
God sees the sharks eating other sharks. Our lad hunts for bigger game.

He looks for Art, and searches Nature for a Theme.
At Club Baudelaire he dons a yellow aqualung
to scribble underwater with a special pen.
See the poet write!

The papers turn up months late, here, but wait — he shouts! He’s won a Major Prize! No — the lighting’s wrong. Rewind...Makeup...Action!
He wins the Prize again.

It might look like a bludge, but seriously, chaps,
there are millions of worthwhile poems out there! He scribbles on, ignoring the tourists, sunbaking earnestly: Biggles on Holiday.
The personal satire is obvious; but there are more serious implications here, for the object of satire is at least in part the posturing of poet-as-photographer: Biggles — aviator/poet/photographer — post-modern hero of the technological age, permanently on holiday in some other reality, without necessarily even leaving home. Super-tourist ... ‘sun-baking earnestly’. Of what, then, does the poet-as-photographer stand accused?

First, of looting — which might be called, ironically, preserving, but which is mere trophy-hunting: a form of appropriation, or cannibalism: conspicuous consumption. Hence the given roles, of the big game hunter, the collector (who labels life in Latin), the shark which eats other sharks, the tourist who ignores other tourists.

Second, he is accused of middle-class naïveté and pretension, of not admitting to himself his own predatory nature. Personal shades into social satire: ‘It might look like a bludge, but seriously, chaps,/ there are millions of worthwhile poems out there!’ — simply starving to be snapped up. It is an accusation that reminds me of Sontag’s comment: ‘Social misery has inspired the comfortably-off with the urge to take pictures, the gentlest of prédations, in order to document a hidden reality, that is, a reality hidden from them’ (On Photography, p. 55).

The poetic satire to which I have been referring was written by John Tranter and published in a national newspaper, The Weekend Australian — where photographs, of course, are an integral feature. In this context, the poem is particularly subversive, since its satirical exposure of the social assumptions behind photography implicitly comment upon the institutions which support photography in its framing of ‘news’, its ‘transform[ing] history into spectacle’ (On Photography, p. 110).

In a letter responding to my sending him a draft copy of this article Tranter directs my attention to another of his satires focused upon photography/poetry, ‘Reversal Process’, on which he comments: it ‘deals specifically with the perceived role of the glamour-action photographer and implicitly compares it to that of the (hack-romantic) poet’:

Lift-off: now the computer tells you the time
like an aphasic baby, its purple numerals
skidding across your eyes. You want to be car-sick
but you’re too busy, wow, another heroine,
did all this happen just for you? That
plausible scenery, the light metered perfectly,
those people moving like giraffes, just for you?
The graph paper says it’s all external:
‘it has existed forever, independent of meaning’
but you know that's bullshit: 'Photo, *ergo sum* and you can feel the girl's moist little hand, it's meant for you, isn't it...'

Certainly Tranter is not the only Australian writer to take a rather dim view of the photographic enterprise. In *Contemporary Portraits*, for example, Murray Bail exaggerates and distorts the aims of photography satirically by focusing upon a man who plans to document the existence of every person on earth, to produce with a camera 'the most authentic representation of the human species that may be assembled'. The unity of such an exhibition, were it possible, would inevitably be provided (whether consciously or otherwise) by the ideology behind the project. But the ideology of humanism, the ideology generally assumed by photography, is deconstructed by Bail in his discussion of the twenty-three types of people with which his fictional photographer has chosen to commence his documentation of the human race:

- 'At least one person who always has the last word.'
- 'At least one person who would rather be almost anyone else.'
- 'At least one person who is beautiful but dumb.'

And so on...

The photographic way of seeing is obviously not one of the ways in which Australian literature has distanced itself from British and European models of perception, from the various inherited visual discourses which sought to order and explain the New World not only in Australia but in Canada also. Nor is this way of seeing the only way in which Canadian literature has focused its identity: but it is certainly one of the most pervasive and persuasive. Klein's 'Portrait of the Poet as Landscape' is entirely consistent with the tradition:

And now in imagination he has climbed another planet, the better to look with single camera view upon this earth —

Of course, having taken up this position, Klein's poet-as-photographer 'would like to write down in a book' everything he sees.

Even when they do not include the photograph with the written text, Canadian writers write about photographs noticeably often, inspired by the traces, the shard, the broken pot. The attitude is 'back to the photographs', to 'the land as a transparency/ imposed across the mind'. From this, according to Candas Jane Dorsey, 'ideas develop/
the mind records from the photographic eye

the eye open to all
the photogenic universe[^15]

Canadian anthologists, too, seem to like to include a photograph of each of the writers whose work appears in the anthology. This is rare in Australian publication. There may be a photograph on the back cover of a Penguin edition, but there is no Australian equivalent for a literary photographer like Sam Tata.[^16] It is interesting also that the portraits in Canadian anthologies are always stylized, self-consciously composed — always posed, for that matter — as though the writer were acting the role of author, playing that special character which in any case the writing itself creates but which generally remains invisible in Australian literature. (There is only one well-known Australian anthology which does include photographs: Michael Dransfield in a monk’s habit; the back of Vincent Buckley’s head; Bruce Dawe out of focus; and the photograph supposed to be of Richard Tipping, with sunglasses that cover half of his face and magnify his eyes to appear quite monstrous, is not of him at all, but of some unknown and ‘unliterary’ character.)[^17] In other words, the literary portraits in anthologies of Canadian writing appear not as psychological studies but as effects of the writing — not as mere side-effects either, but as significant personae, since the writing itself is photographic: the explicit photographic image is a mere extension of word. Dorsey states the metaphorical equation succinctly: ‘the image machine [is] the poem’ (‘Modern Technology’, p. 110) — which takes me back to my first metaphor, ‘the train is a camera’. Or, if you like, the train is ‘the image machine’.

The construction of the CPR transcontinental railway coincides historically with the simplification of photographic technology toward the end of the nineteenth century, and with the rise of the camera culture, as more and more people began to take up photography as a leisure activity. It also coincides with the rapid world-wide development of tourism in the latter half of the century. If the CPR has a distinctive presence and prominence in Canadian tourism, it is as a direct result of the philosophy of its first general manager, a philosophy aptly described by E.J. Hart as ‘capitalizing the scenery’. In a recent publication entitled The Selling of Canada: The CPR and the Beginnings of Canadian Tourism, Hart writes: ‘For several decades its [i.e. the CPR’s] tourist advertising delineated the view of Canada, both at home and around the world. Its view of Canada as a place of scenic wonders and cultural diversity prevails even to this
If the railway itself has become central to the idea of Canada, this is partly because, virtually from the commencement of construction, the CPR commissioned professional photographers and artists to document the landscape through which the trains would pass. Subsequently, the tourist craze at the end of the century was to travel across Canada by train with a camera. Two points are worth making here. First, Canada was both shaped and marketed by the CPR as a photogenic phenomenon. Second, having edited the Australian companion volume to Light-hall’s *Songs of the Great Dominion* (1889), then having come to Canada specifically in order to cross the country (at least in part by train), Douglas Sladen could not resist commenting in a manner cross-culturally revealing: ‘The Canadian Pacific Railway ought to have a commission on detective cameras, Kodaks, hawkeyes, etc. for the average passenger would as soon think of going without antibilious medicines as without a camera.’

On one level this is a simple and sarcastic statement about tourism as it was developing in North America. But it also anticipates the post-modern contract that even then was in the process of being drawn up in Canada between technology and the literary imagination. Technology, tourism, photography — each of these has been identified at one time or another by cultural commentators as an archetypally post-modern ‘activity’. No wonder that post-modernism is flourishing in Canadian writing, or that it has been so quickly accepted — which is not the case in Australian writing.

Robert Kroetsch has commented on the ease with which Canada adopted the strategies of post-modernism. Kroetsch, who describes himself as a post-modernist, regards his own writing as an attempt ‘to come to terms with Surrealism’ (*Labyrinths of Voice*, p. 31). One way to do this would be to become a photographer, for as Sontag writes:

Photographs, which turn the past into a consumable object, are a short cut. Any collection of photographs is an exercise in Surrealist montage and the Surrealist abbreviation of history. (*On Photography*, p. 68)

Photographers, operating within the terms of the Surrealist sensibility suggest the vanity of even trying to understand the world and instead propose that we collect it. (*On Photography*, p. 82)

Many Canadian writers have taken the short cut, have taken a razor to the eye and installed a camera lens in its place, thereby altering perception of person, place and history — but ultimately producing what
Neuman rightly regards as 'the Canadian myth ... of stasis' (*Labyrinths of Voice*, p. 126): crypt(o)graphy: a fascinating and funereal enigma.

Canada, much more than Australia, has been subject to the invasion of the body-snatchers, the image-makers:

how the machines connect us
heart to heart
...
how technology intervenes for us
keeps us warm and honest
how we talk to each other in the night

the machines of loving grace
...
how we are nurtured by mechanisms
how safe we can become
we make a nest of technology
to raise our children in

(Dorsey, 'Modern Technology', p. 112)

Photographs involve a specific sense of loss — the loss of reality, the limitation of movement and of experience. Some contemporary Canadian artists and writers have felt the loss, and are now involved in opposition to the photographic vision. Some are refusing the abbreviation of history, deconstructing the myth of stasis. Among the artists, Tuscona is one: 'I don’t want a camera; I want something to happen to me.' Among the writers, Kroetsch says:

There is nothing more grotesque, perhaps, than a snapshot which takes up one instant and suggests its incredible validity against all that time. The literal use of photographs in books of Canadian poetry ... I think it’s a terrible longing for validation ... validation in terms of stasis.

I’d rather have anarchy. I’d rather go back to carnival.

(*Labyrinths of Voice*, p. 126)

NOTES


6. Daphne Marlatt, 'Long as in Time? Steveston', in Michael Ondaatje, ed., *The Long Poem Anthology* (Toronto: Coach House, 1979), pp. 317-318. Note that 'Steveston' was published first with the photographs collected as one section of the text and the poems as another; then, in Ondaatje's anthology, without the photographs; and, in the recent second edition, with poems and photographs interspersed.


8. Consider, for example, the following list of poets and painters (respectively) whose work appeared, one responding to the other, in the pages of *Australian Letters* between October 1960 (III, ii) and September 1964 (VI, iii-iv): Judith Wright/Clifton Pugh; David Campbell/Russell Drysdale; Geoffrey Dutton/Lawrence Daws; Max Harris/Arthur Boyd; Ray Matthew/Tom Gleghorn; Thomas Shapcott/Robert Juniper; Douglas Stewart/Donald Friend; Chris Wallace-Crabbe/John Brack; Randolph Stow/Sidney Nolan; Rodney Hall/Andrew Sibley; Roland Robinson/Louis Kahan; James McAuley/Leonard French; Rosemary Dobson/Ray Crooke; John Shaw Neilson/Charles Blackman.

9. Mark O'Connor has recently been granted his wish: *Poetry in Pictures: The Barrier Reef* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1985): poems by O'Connor, photographs by Neville Coleman. To be fair, I should also mention some other Australian poets who use photographs: Rhyll McMaster, Robert Kenny, Laurie Duggan, Ken Taylor.

10. John Tranter, 'A Big Country', in *The Weekend Australian (Magazine)*, August 24-25, 1985, p. 15. The title of this poem adds to the satire, for it refers to the title of a television documentary series, one programme of which featured O'Connor in the submarine process of inspiration and composition. Many other aspects of the poem, too, refer to this photographic exploration of O'Connor and his art.


13. It is worth considering that this ridiculous project has in reality a forerunner, hailed in 1952 as 'the greatest photographic exhibition of all time': photographs of people from all over the world, assembled by Edward Steichen to illustrate his theme — 'The Family of Man'. In fact, however, the exhibition illustrated not the family of man, but, as Halla Beloff argues, 'a utopian vision ... manufactured for the comfort and edification of a public that was weary of the Second World War and the Cold War, and wanted to believe that we could now all return to a private existence, because at heart we were all the same, all basically happy and all of goodwill' (*Camera Culture*, p. 124).


16. John Tranter published some photographs of Australian writers in *Scripsi IV, 2* (June, 1984); Brendan Hennessey photographed twelve Australian writers for *An*
Australian Literary Calendar (McPhee-Gribble/Penguin, 1986); and Willy Yang was commissioned as the official photographer at Writers' Week for the Adelaide Festival of Arts, 1986. But little of this work has appeared in literary anthologies or gallery exhibitions.


*This article is a revised version of a conference paper delivered at ACLALS, University of Singapore, June 1986. It evolves partly out of ‘The Railway in Australian Literature’, a paper delivered at the ACSANZ conference at Griffith University, May 1986, forthcoming in World Literature Written in English.

INDEX

Volume Eight, Numbers 1, 2 and 3, 1986

ARTICLES AND ESSAYS

Asagba, Austin Ovigueraye: ‘Roots of African Drama: Critical Approaches and Elements of Continuity’ 84 (3)


Buckridge, Patrick: ‘Colonial Strategies in the Writing of David Malouf’ 48 (3)

Hunter, Eva: ‘Tracking Through the Tangles: The Reader’s Task in Doris Lessing’s The Grass is Singing’ 121 (3)