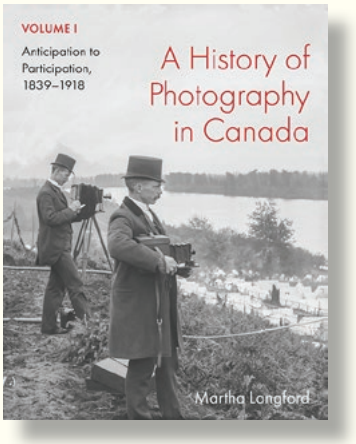

Martha Langford
A History of Photography in Canada, vol. 1: Anticipation to Participation, 1839–1918

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025
600 pp., 402 photos, colour and b&w
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Martha Langford's *A History of Photography in Canada, Volume 1: Anticipation to Participation, 1839–1918* is the first installment in a three-volume series published by McGill-Queen's University Press that aims to provide a comprehensive account of Canadian photographic history. The second volume, *A Medium Unleashed, 1919–1969*, is forthcoming in 2026, and the third, *Momentous Indecision, 1970–2010*, is currently in progress. Guided by the framing question "What did Canadians know about photography and when did they know it?" (xvii), the first volume announces its methodological orientation early on. The echo of Watergate in this phrasing signals the sly humour that surfaces throughout the volume.

Photography's arrival in Canada is treated not as an inevitable technological triumph but as part of a longer, unresolved problem of truth—or one could say objectivity or fact—here framed as trust between the teller and listener (x). Canadians first encountered photography through words rather than images, a point that underscores Langford's broader interest in mediation and reception. Early photographic practice is situated within a period of territorial consolidation between 1840 and 1866, when photography functioned as a tool of nation-building—useful for surveying land and resources, but equally for portraiture, where sitters, subjects, and specimens overlap in revealing and often troubling ways.

After introducing photography's arrival in Canada in Part 1, the volume is organized around four thematic constellations: people, places, events, and objects. Part 2, "Sitting Subjects," turns to photographs of people, examining both those who chose to be photographed (sitters) and those who did not always get to choose (subjects and specimens), reading both through a relational framework. Part 3 focuses on landscape photography. Framed as "Promising Prospects," these images are read as functioning like "promissory notes" of future development, abundance, and control over land and water (7). In Part 4, a focus on events highlights a decisive shift, as images begin not merely to record history but to shape it. Langford highlights moments when events pause or are altered for the sake of the photograph, from the interruption of Thomas D'Arcy McGee's funeral cortege in 1868 to the carefully staged delays surrounding the driving of the "last spike" of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885 to allow for multiple photographic poses.

The section on material culture, tellingly titled "The Stuff that Mattered," tracks how photographic objects operate as carriers of meaning and value. Two particularly compelling examples are the photomechanical reproductions of X-rays published in the *Saturday Globe* in February 1896—mere weeks after news of the discovery was announced in Vienna's *Die Presse*—and Harry Sutcliffe's *Workers Leaving the Wabasso Cotton Company Factory, Trois-Rivières, Quebec* (1914), which deliberately echoes the Lumière brothers' canonical cinematic scene of workers leaving the factory. Throughout the volume, seemingly small details—such as the first appearance of a photograph in a Canadian daily newspaper on March 28, 1891—are woven into a broader narrative about access, circulation, and agency. These issues come into sharp focus in the closing chapter on the First World War, which marks a transition in photography's social and political role within the context of nation formation.

The book's major themes and key players are present throughout, but the framing is never predictable. To grasp its more discursive mode of argumentation, it is instructive to consider its beginning and its end. The opening image—William Notman's studio makes a house call to photograph the Frothingham family in Cacouna, Quebec, resulting in a photograph of Louisa Frothingham posed as an invalid—sets the tone. The image is

ambiguous and, in some respects, unremarkable, yet it introduces Langford's deceptively simple question: what did people want from photographic representations of themselves? (6). This question recurs throughout the book, cutting across social classes, regions, and photographic uses. The volume concludes just as unexpectedly, with a photograph of the Halifax Explosion—*Bodies in the Chebucto Road Mortuary* by the Cox Brothers. By closing on this image, Langford foregrounds the consequences of bringing the war home and, in the absence of a formal conclusion, allows the narrative to settle into an elegiac register.

What Langford describes as a "synthesis of a history already in plain sight" (xiv) refers to histories collected and preserved in archives—records that contain a "thousand voices," both contemporaneous and contemporary. Reflecting her privileging of experience and the archive, contemporaneous voices are named in the main text, while contemporary historians and theorists appear primarily in the notes. This strategy creates an immersive narrative flow and allows archival objects to drive the analysis, though it occasionally produces ambiguity. For example, Chapter 6 is structured around the concept of the "shadow archive," developed by Allan Sekula, whose explicit naming in the text would better orient the reader. Throughout, the voice of the author—self-described at one point as "an unreformed curator" (xiv)—remains quietly present.

Langford moves at a brisk pace, rarely lingering on a single figure or image. Instead, the narrative advances deliberately through geographies, biographies, technologies, and visual practices. The book is richly illustrated, pairing canonical images with lesser-known material drawn from a remarkable depth of archival research. Familiar photographs appear newly charged when placed alongside unexpected examples, and the narrative is carefully contextualized for readers both familiar with Canadian history and those encountering it for the first time. The effect is cumulative rather than exhaustive. Photography is not simply decoded as evidence but, as Langford notes in her introduction, "felt and followed, through perception, memory, and imagination" (ix).

The volume joins a growing body of scholarship on photography in Canada and sits productively alongside Sarah Parsons and Sarah Bassnett's *Photography in Canada, 1839–1989: An Illustrated History* (2023), a more pedagogically oriented text. Together, these works fill a significant gap in the field. Earlier studies have tended to focus on specific themes, photographers, or collections, such as Colleen Skidmore's *Rare Merit: Women in Photography in Canada, 1840–1940* (2022); Susan Close's *Framing Identity: Social Practices of Photography in Canada, 1880–1920* (2007); Carol Payne and Andrea Kunard's *The Cultural Work of Photography in Canada* (2011); and Joan M. Schwartz's 1996 special issue of *History of Photography*. The publications by Parsons and Bassnett, alongside Langford's multi-volume project, mark the first sustained attempts at comprehensive national histories of Canadian photography.

What defines Langford's project is its sheer exhaustiveness and its sustained commitment to a multi-volume national history that remains refreshingly unselfconscious about the nation as a frame. For Langford, the belatedness of Canada, rooted in its experience as a settler colony—and of Canada's historical self-writing—becomes an opportunity to ask different questions and to write a "history from the bottom up" (xi), understood here as a history grounded in experience and encounter with photography.

Volume 1 appears at a moment of renewed interest in the nation-state after a prolonged period dominated by scholarship focused on cultural exchange, transnational circulation, and hemispheric histories. As geopolitical tensions intensify, questions of Canadianness and of the distinct historical conditions of this place have returned to the fore. Langford's book is particularly well suited to this moment. Without lapsing into nationalism, it insists that Canada remains an analytically productive frame, especially for understanding how photography took root within specific political, territorial, and social formations. Some of the histories that emerge are unexpected. Lewis Hine's photographs of French Canadian child laborers working in Vermont, for instance, introduce a localized Canadian perspective into a well-known history of industrial labor and reform.

For readers unfamiliar with Canadian history, the volume provides substantial historical grounding. Canonical moments in the national narrative frame the photographs, just as images are mobilized to illuminate those moments in return. In Chapter 2, Langford notes that photography's arrival in Canada coincides with the presentation of the Durham Report to the British Parliament in early 1839, when the population stood at approximately 1.2 million. The report's recommendations led directly to

the Act of Union of 1840, which united Upper and Lower Canada (now Ontario and Quebec). Such historical specificity is uncommon in photography scholarship, where political context is often abbreviated or assumed. Here it provides essential scaffolding while reinforcing Langford's central claim: that something consequential can be learned by attending closely to the Canadian frame itself.

More complex and contested histories of the nation emerge in photographs such as Louis Riel addressing the jury during his trial for treason, which Langford reads as "not a timeless image of the 'vanishing race' but a turning-point image in the history of race relations in Canada, at that point unfinished" (308). While one might argue that this history remains unfinished, such moments make visible the unstable terrain on which the nation-state rests. Langford moves from the Riel trial to the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, linking displacement and territorial expansion through the logic and materiality of the railroad. Rather than treating Canada as a neutral container for photographic practice, she demonstrates how photography and the nation developed in tandem. The careful alignment of images with legislative milestones, demographic realities, and territorial consolidation strengthens the argument that photographic history gains explanatory power when grounded in the particularities of place. In this respect, *Anticipation to Participation* makes a persuasive case for revisiting national histories as historically contingent frameworks through which photography was produced, circulated, and understood.

Elegantly written and full of surprises, the book is magisterial in scope and rich in insight. Throughout, Langford resists overdetermined readings of images as transparent documents. Her framing of both the nation and the medium allows contradictions, uncertainties, and uneven developments to remain visible. Photography emerges as both instrument and experience, implicated in governance and memory alike. Characterized by archival rigor and conceptual clarity, *A History of Photography in Canada* will stand as a defining reference for the field for decades to come.

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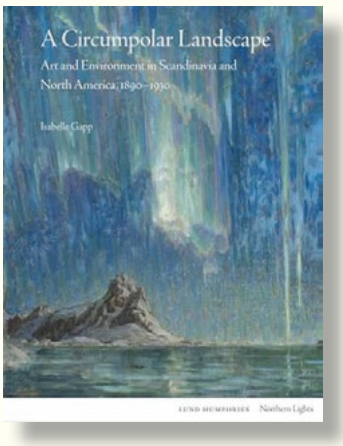

Isabelle Gapp
A Circumpolar Landscape: Art and Environment in Scandinavia and North America, 1890–1930

Lund Humphries, 2024
208 pp., 32 colour and 18 b/w illus.
$134.00 CAD (cloth)
ISBN 9781848225886

Vanessa Bateman

Canada's Group of Seven and Scandinavia's National Romantic painters have enjoyed more than a century of celebrated prominence in galleries, scholarship, and the public imagination, and yet this very staying power has become a point of contention, with critics arguing that the study and display of historic landscape painting by white artists remains "stagnant and self-referential," fixated on nationalism and symbolism at the expense of fresh thinking (10). In the Canadian context, landscape painting has generated more scholarly attention than perhaps any other genre. This raises legitimate questions: has the field exhausted its generative potential? And what new contributions might the study of historic landscape painting in Canada and Scandinavia still offer? One mode of interpretation is urgently suggested by the world outside the gallery: with the accelerating climate crisis and biodiversity loss, it is no longer possible to look at a landscape in the same way—let alone the circumpolar region, whose melting glaciers and lone polar bears are icons of the Anthropocene.

It is in this context that environmental art history has emerged as a thriving and generative field contributing revisionist histories of Western art. The environmental turn in art history was particularly evident in 2024, with the publication of Siobhan